Albert E. Cowdrey: A Skeptical Spirit

58370

Fantasy & Science Fiction

DECEMBER

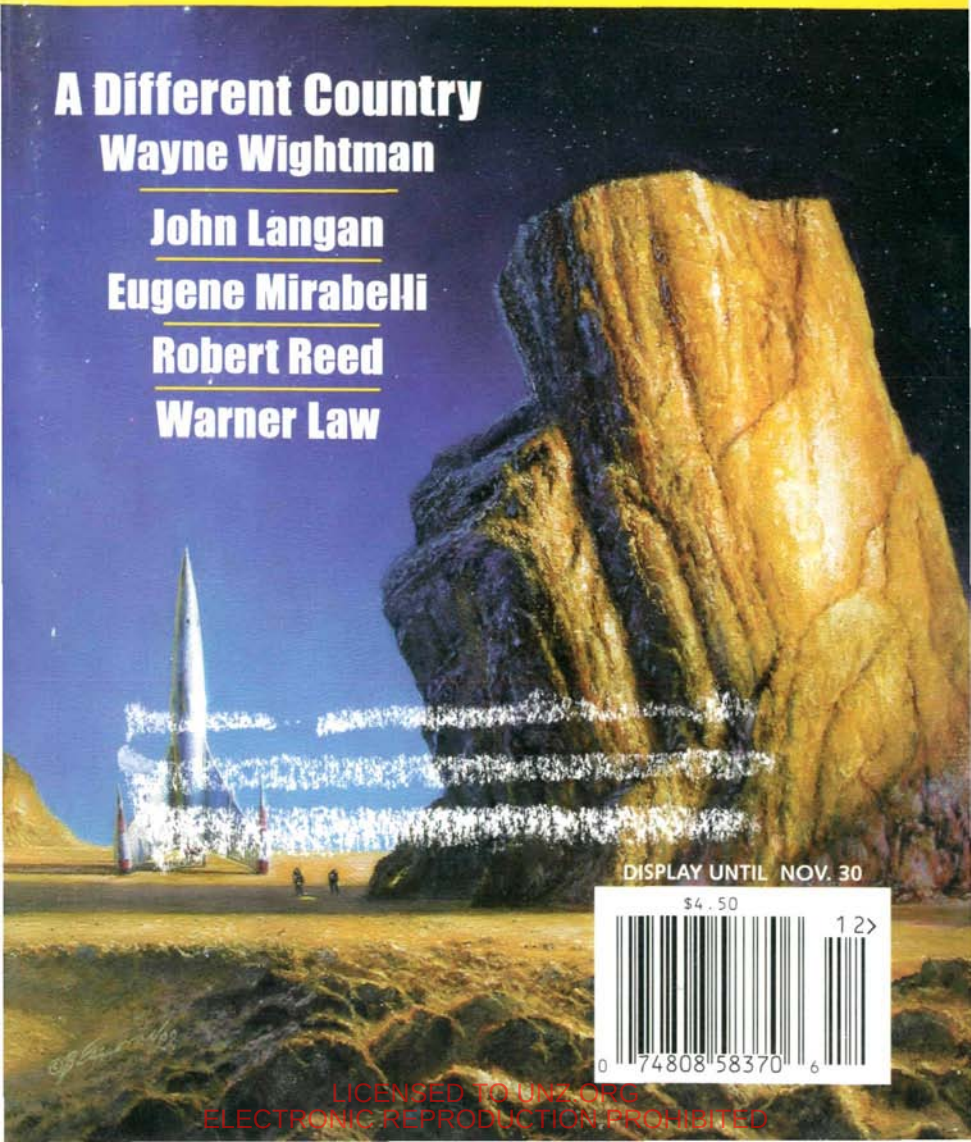
A Different Country
Wayne Wightman

John Langan

Eugene Mirabelli

Robert Reed

Warner Law



DISPLAY UNTIL NOV. 30

$4.50

12

0 74808 58370 6

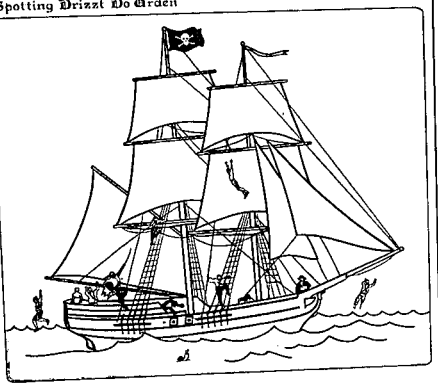
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pirate Safety & Emergency Procedures

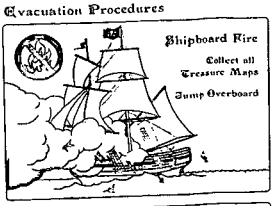
For your safety, do not remove this card from pirate ship.

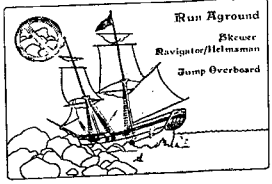
Safety On Board

Spotting Drizzt Do'Urden

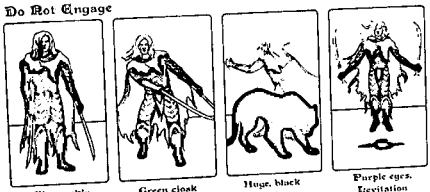


Evacuation Procedures



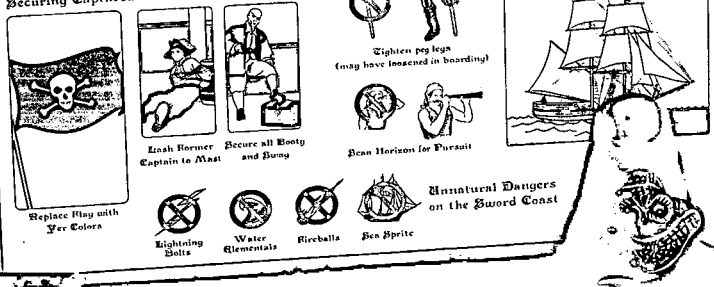


Do Not Engage



Think Before Goin' in the Drink

Securing Captured Vessels


Tighten peg legs
(may have loosened in boarding)
Replace flag with Yer Colors
Lash Former Captain to Mast
Secure all Booty and Bump
Scan Horizon for Pursuit

Unnatural Dangers on the Sword Coast

Know yer risks. Read fast.

Even the most dangerous pirates on the Sword Coast should beware when facing the likes of Drizzt Do'Urden. Following in the wake of *The New York Times* best-selling title, *The Orc King*, R.A. Salvatore plunges the dark elf and his friends into dangerous waters with *The Pirate King*.

Releases: October 7, 2008

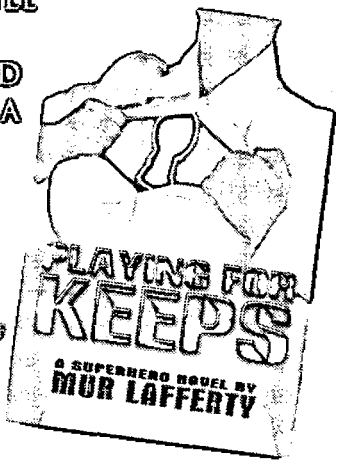
All trademarks are property of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. ©2008 Wizards

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SUPERHERO FICTION FROM SWARM PRESS

"PART SATIRE, PART THRILL RIDE, THIS SAGA OF A RAGTAG BAND OF SUPERHEROES WITH A MOST UNLIKELY ASSORTMENT OF ABILITIES STARTS AT A GALLOP AND THEN ACCELERATES."
—JAMES PATRICK KELLY, WINNER OF THE HUGO AND NEBULA AWARDS

ISBN: 1934861162



"PART STAN LEE, PART JOHN HUGHES, BRAVE MEN RUN WILL MAKE YOU BELIEVE, ONCE AND FOR ALL, THAT A MAN REALLY CAN FLY."
—J.C. HUTCHINS, AUTHOR OF 7TH SON

ISBN: 193486109X

AVAILABLE AT AMAZON.COM, BN.COM, MOST ONLINE BOOKSTORES, OR ASK YOUR LOCAL BOOKSELLER

WWW.SWARMPRESS.COM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction
December • 60th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

A FOREIGN COUNTRY 7 **Wayne Wightman**
LEAVE 56 **Robert Reed**
A SKEPTICAL SPIRIT 94 **Albert E. Cowdrey**
HOW THE DAY RUNS DOWN 121 **John Langan**

SHORT STORIES

FALLING ANGEL 48 **Eugene Mirabelli**

CLASSIC REPRINT

THE ALARMING LETTERS FROM SCOTTSDALE 79 **Warner Law**

DEPARTMENTS

EDITORIAL 6 **Gordon Van Gelder**
BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 38 **Charles de Lint**
BOOKS 43 **James Sallis**
COMING ATTRACTIONS 78
FILMS: BLOODY HELL ON LAKE NEUCHÂTEL 115 **Lucius Shepard**
INDEX TO VOLUMES 114 & 115 159
CURIOSITIES 162 **Lucy Sussex**

CARTOONS: Arthur Masear (120).
COVER: "THE MOMENT" BY BOB EGGLETON

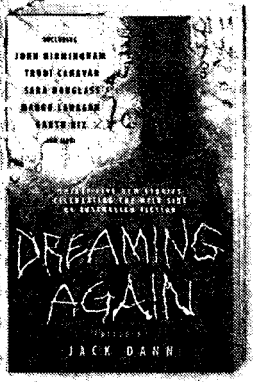
GORDON VAN GELDER, Publisher/Editor BARBARA J. NORTON, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor KEITH KAHLA, Assistant Publisher
HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor JOHN J. ADAMS, Assistant Editor
CAROL PINCHEFSKY, Contests Editor JOHN M. CAPPELLO, Newsstand Circulation
The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 115, No. 6, Whole No. 678, December 2008. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $4.50 per copy. Annual subscription $50.99; $62.99 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, 105 Leonard St., Jersey City, NJ 07307. Periodical postage paid at Jersey City, NJ 07307, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2008 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
www.fandsf.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eos Books — *The Next Chapter*

1998-2008

A Decade of the Finest Fantasy and Science Fiction in the Universe



Dreaming Again

Thirty-five New Stories Celebrating the Wild Side of Australian Fiction

Jack Dann

From the editors of *Dreaming Down-Under* comes a new, critically-acclaimed Australian anthology with stories to shock, astound, and delight readers.

The Undead Kama Sutra

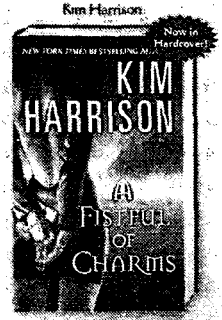
Mario Acevedo

"Acevedo has proven once again that he is a very disturbed man — and I mean that in the absolute finest sense of the term."

—Tim Dorsey

A Fistful of Charms

Kim Harrison



"The world of the Hollows is fast-moving, funny, harrowing and scary, and—the greatest compliment to a fantasy—absolutely real."

—Diana Gabaldon

Dark Rain

Tony Richards

"Once again Richards confirms his superb storytelling skill and refreshes the pleasure of savouring fine prose."

—*SF Site*

Celebrating 10 Years of Bestselling and Award-Winning Science Fiction and Fantasy. In celebration of our 10th Anniversary, Eos Books is offering readers the opportunity to download e-books of some of today's hottest stars as well as up-and-coming writers. Throughout 2008, fans will be able to download a new book every two months — a great way to celebrate the Eos brand name, thank our loyal readers and introduce new readers to the fold! Visit eosbooks.com for more details and many more opportunities for free stuff, and be sure to tune in to our new internet radio show, THE BEYOND. Visit www.AuthorsOnAir.com for more details.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

THIS ISSUE marks the start of our sixtieth year of continual publication. To celebrate our diamond jubilee, we're planning a special, extra-large October/November issue and it promises to be memorable.

But one issue didn't seem to be enough to celebrate sixty years. So we decided to extend the celebration throughout the year.

We've invited various members of our staff (past and present) to pick one *F&SF* story each from our sixty-year history and say a few words about it. Assistant Editor John Joseph Adams selected this month's story. In the coming year, you'll see selections from Kris Rusch, both Audrey and Ed Ferman, and several other blasts from the staff.

Your humble editor, who is not above patting himself on the back every once in a while, came up with another good idea. There was a question of what to do about the cover for our anniversary issue. Reprint old covers in a collage? Commission a new cover? Eventually, I realized the best approach was to turn the process over to the talent. I contacted several artists and invited them to submit proposals for the anniversary cover. David Hardy's cover is the one we selected, but they were all terrific and we'll be running them throughout the year. The art on this month's issue — "The Moment" by Bob Eggleton — is indicative of the level of submissions we received, so I have no doubt that the debate will be healthy as to which of the year's covers is the best.

On a less joyous note, subscribers continue to report that they're receiving deceptive subscription solicitations, so I thought I'd drop in another reminder here to watch out. If you want to be sure a renewal notice is from us, look for two things: (1) our return address of PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030, and (2) your sub expiration date at the end of the line above your name. Any notice you receive that's missing this information is not authorized by us. Please don't be deceived.

— GVG

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This story marks Wayne Wightman's twelfth story in F&SF *(including one collaboration with Richard Paul Russo), but his last one was almost ten years ago. Many of his short stories are collected in* Ganglion & Other Stories. *These days he lives in Oregon.*

When C. M. Kornbluth wrote about "The Silly Season," he wasn't describing that stretch of autumn every leap year that leads up to the first Tuesday in November...but he should have been.

A Foreign Country

By Wayne Wightman

My Essay On What You'd Be Happier Not Knowing, But Live With It, Since You Will Anyway

by

Quentin A. Denmore

I'M NOT THAT SMART, MAYBE C+ if I work hard. And maybe somewhere along the line I got dropped on my head and I'm just totally nutzoid, but maybe I'm not. Maybe I actually saw the "catastroclysm" coming down the road but didn't adequately vociferate my suspicions, etc., which is the same as not seeing anything at all, as some people would think, with whom I would agree with reluctance. My purpose here, however, is to tell you what is going to happen to you. And this isn't any kind of prophecy. It's way worse than that.

Call me naïve or a little slow on the uptake, but I always dreamed about being a respected news reporter, scouting out major headline stories, which I would report realistically. As things went, and without going into all the self-serving "I-grew-up-so-poor-I-ate-dirt-for-dinner" stuff, I considered myself VERY lucky to be hired by United News

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Association (UNA) as a fourth-string temporary sometime go-fer. I also had a girlfriend then. Her name was AnnaJanina, spelled like that with the capital in the middle. Because I had this job with UNA, I got to take her out to a few upscale restaurants, which was extremely nice and made her like me more. But I don't have a girlfriend now, or anybody else, because my life went into a suckhole like nearly everybody else's, except I know it and you probably won't until it's too late.

So anyway, out of nowhere, for whatever reason, my number came up with UNA and I got my first actual reporting debut: "Send Denmore to Arizona to cover the dog racing." I wanted to squirt. Pardon me, but I did want to. Humiliatingly, I did the dog races like a good sport and met some really nice dogs and some alleged human beings who act like Nazi psychos with their dogs. With this assignment, I proved to UNA that I was a willing tool.

Everyone was busy with the Rep and Dem candidates, what with the various scandals, the shooting, and the attempted kidnapping. But there stood Quentin A. Denmore, third string temp, with the dog racing credit to his name. As a reward, my next assignment was to cover the final election days of the third party's gomer candidate, Roger Allen Faber, who was, in my C+ opinion, a complete set of mental issues, except without any spark of excitement or anything remotely newsworthy, which is why I got the job. I wrote this:

Not the Same Old Same Old

by Q. A. Denmore

(UNA) — While Joseph J. Weddell and Evan Lawrence attacked each other's positions on everything from haircuts to UN membership, Roger Allen Faber shook hands at Monkson's Hardware in Center, Colorado, and then drove on to glad-hand in Monte Vista at Glenn's Diner.

As usual, Faber promised "happy times" if elected, winked and smiled a lot, and signed several autographs.

When asked what "happy times" meant in terms of economic policy, Faber did his expected "Everyone's Drifty Uncle" routine.

"Happy times, my boy," he said with his arm across the reporter's shoulders, "are what you can remember in those moments of your past

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where there was kindness and goodness and the kind of safety you had when you never thought about it."

In spite of Faber's non-answer, the crowd of twelve seemed charmed.

[Etc.]

AnnaJanina did a little fixing on the writing for me. I miss her some of the time.

So, okay, what is this so-called "catastroclysm"?

I have no shame in now making reference to my romantic life with AnnaJanina, which I must do in order to answer the catastroclysm question. How shameful could it be to make reference to our romantic interludes, what with rude messianic lesbian women rushing up and down the streets and talk shows discussing the protective — I kid you not — PROTECTIVE powers of certain prime numbers, which people then tattooed on their bodies in all sorts of places, some of which were allegedly aligned with their so-called chakras, which I think is a load. So I'm supposed to be Puritanical with all that going on? I don't think so.

The first clue was this, which was during the last time AnnaJanina and I were intimate, at Singh's Motor Inn, just outside of Huntington Beach, California, room 203. Afterwards I sensed uneasiness in her repose. I asked her if she was troubled about some issue, but she was reluctant to proclaim it and said if she had a few hundred dollars for her bills, it would reduce her concerns to some extent, so I wrote her a check.

At any rate, three weeks later (note: *three weeks later*) in a phone conversation, I sensed more unease in her when I asked about her bills.

"Do you have other unspoken concerns?" I asked quizzically.

"Yes," she said, "All along I have been afraid of losing you."

"How can that be?" I asked worriedly.

"Well," AnnaJanina said, "it is this that worries me. I feel so alone, what with you so far off away, and with me in Huntington Beach and in truth I can hardly remember you." (Note: this is three weeks later.) "It's probably just me."

I had just recently seen on TV that when someone says, "It's probably just me," they mean, "It's all you and I'm not going to talk about it." So I braced for the worst.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What we said next was private, but what it amounted to was AnnaJanina was seeing some guy named Henry who lived closer. At the time, I was crushed.

So this was the first clue, of how everything went south, her forgetting me after three weeks. But at any rate, I now had no reason not to stick with Faber, whom I was at the time considering leaving in order to propose to and marry AnnaJanina.

I didn't know what else to do, crushed as I was, so I kept doing what I'd been doing, which was following Faber through the backwoods to shake fifty hands a day.

"Fifty hands," he would say. "Now that's a good day, isn't it?"

I would say, "Whatever you say, Mr. Faber," and file some kind of story. I felt my life on the edge of being swallowed up by black gloom. AnnaJanina was gone, and I got to visit three to five versions of Nowhere Town every day.

Actually, Faber is a charming "nitwit," who might be a safer choice than the other two. Joseph J. Weddell's usual solution for any problem is to send the police or the National Guard to take care of the issue. On the other hand, I have heard that he was generous to his underlings, although what he gave when he was generous he often demanded back when he was foaming at the mouth. Or so I heard. Reporters feared his generosity.

Evan Lawrence is a sociopath, in my opinion. My college psych professor made a big deal about recognizing sociopaths (I think he must have had some early encounter with one), so I occasionally recognize one of them out in real life. So what I see, if I may speak freely, is that if ever a conscienceless human-looking skinbag walked the earth, it was Evan Lawrence. He saw the world as consisting of three categories: that which he could buy, that which he could steal, and that which could be profitably screwed without being bought or stolen. Word was he beat up a hooker in Little Rock when she threatened to tell people what he wanted her to do. He also didn't pay her, which would have been out of character.

And then there was Roger Allen Faber, six feet tall, an old sixty-two years old, skinny, stooped, thin, thin hair, big stained teeth, and that never-ending grin, holding steady at 13%±3 in the polls. "I'm just a simple light bulb salesman," he'd say so charmingly that people actually believed him. "Elect me and I'll turn on the lights." Everybody figured the 13

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

percent was the sympathy vote and would evaporate. He had a background in home fixture sales, but few people had clear memories of him. The man was Bland with a capital B.

How would he deal with economic or foreign policy issues? The answer: "You know, when problems face me, they just go right away." And he'd wink. He winked a lot with the grin.

All the real political reporters shifted back and forth from one of the major campaigns to the other, getting the big picture, depending on who was hot, who was rot, or who was snot, as I have heard it said. But I got permanently stuck with Faber.

I would file a story, and the news carriers that had a deal with UNA all got what I wrote. I could be in as many as six newspapers a day. Whoopee.

But good old Faber was a person no one could personally dislike. He was anybody's Uncle. He smelled like old clothes, he never had a harsh word for anyone, and he never slipped off-message, which was "Elect me and you'll see happy times," always followed by a wink, the grin, and sometimes by a little "Heh heh."

No matter what I tried, I couldn't get Thing One out of him about what he wanted to do except bring on those "happy times."

Late one night, in a diner by the name of EAT in the middle of Nebraska, I was out of my mind with intense boredom, and there's old Roger Allen Faber, gobbling down waffles and oooing and yumming like it was his best meal of the last twenty years, on the happiest day of his life.

"Mr. Faber," I proposed confidentially, "look. It's late, no one's around but you and me. You're locked at thirteen percent or so, so what is the deal? Why are you doing this? I promise to God I won't tell anyone anything you say in the next two minutes — but I'm getting depressed, Mr. Faber, and the nearest person I know is two thousand miles away. As some kind of friend, why are we doing this?"

He looked up, his eyes watery blue, the grin tamed down a little, and he held that square of dripping waffle on the end of his fork, and said, "Happy times, son. That's it. Two words. And I'm out here to get the lay of the land, to meet people. Let me buy you some of this. These blueberries are wonderful. They're a harbinger of happy times to come."

I had to look up harbinger.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As far as I was concerned, he was probably right. I was thinking, and I remember this, that things probably would get better because the only way things could get worse was if the Earth opened up and swallowed me down to hell. Later on, from that harbinger moment, I also learned one of life's really true lessons: *Don't ever say, "Things can't get any worse."*

Weddell Rising, Lawrence Fades,
Faber Pursues Alternate Reality

by Q. A. Denmore

(UNA) — As November nears, the gap between Lawrence and Weddell continues to increase, 43% to 32%, with Faber dropping to 12% with 13% undecided (margin of error ±4.5%).

On condition of anonymity, one Weddell follower conceded that they were against the ropes. Weddell's donations have been reduced to a trickle in the last three weeks while Lawrence supporters are writing bigger and bigger checks.

Meanwhile, Roger Allen Faber treks through New Mexico at the rate of three villages a day in a campaign few take seriously except Mr. Faber himself.

Whereas the other campaigns run along predictable lines, Faber's 12% juggernaut runs along in an eight-year-old Toyota.

Every day, Mr. Faber and his entourage can be seen along lonely highways of the Southwest.

[Etc.]

Who could have known that how I got to be his driver was my second clue. It was simple enough. Faber's driver ran off one night, we presumed, so guess what? I became the driver — his entourage.

Related to this, though I didn't connect the dots till it was way too late, was this: Several weeks before I joined the campaign, Faber's vice presidential choice died. I say "died," because that is what is generally assumed, because his body was never found after he presumably wandered off from a motel one night into a Kansas cornfield. He was seventy-six and often raved about the gold standard and trade with South America — real

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"hot button" issues — so news-wise he got old in about ten minutes. Then he died, or at any rate disappeared.

As a result of the VP's bad reality contact and presumed death, interest in Faber dropped off the charts, until UNA found a barrel they could scrape the bottom of, and I was selected the "pool reporter," soon to be "his entourage." Faber was now back on the charts, though usually as a footnote. My career was soaring.

The day before the election, Faber now down to nine percent, we had breakfast in Carrizozo, New Mexico, and lunch in Tinnie where Faber did his usual "good times" ramble and signed three autographs. Later, as we were standing in front of the Linger Longer Lounge, with toothpicks in our mouths, I suggested to Faber that we might head over to Roswell, since it was close and ridiculous. He loved the idea.

There, he drew the largest crowd we'd seen in weeks — thirty-five tourists, some wearing inflatable flying saucer hats and others wearing bug-eyed alien masks and a few wearing both. Even though I'd never been there, it seemed familiar to me, probably from television.

As I watched, I felt my great depression come back and hover over me. This was not the way I wanted to spend my life, listening to a politician say nothing, with people who wore goofy hats, and a lot of dust on my shoes. For the first time on this assignment I got into my mental health emergency kit. Then, happily dazed, I strolled through the crowd to pick up any interesting comments I could put in my next newsless piece.

"Mr. Faber?" asked a fourteen-year-old kid in an alien T-shirt. "Mr. Faber, are you from space?"

"Well, son, as I hear it, matter is mostly space, yet here we all are. I've got more space in me than I've got me in here. So do you. I guess you could say we're all made out of space. All of us." Grin, wink, heh-heh. Making his eyes big and his voice "scary," he said, "I wonder what lurks inside all those empty places?" Minor chuckles from the audience.

I'd never heard that answer before, so I checked it out, and he was right. An atom is like an egg in the center of a racetrack, the nucleus and the nearest electrons. We are almost not here at all. It is an interesting subject on which I should spend more time. Ha ha.

Well, the next day was election day, so I asked Faber if he wanted to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drive over to Albuquerque and stay in a good motel — with a swimming pool, I was hoping.

"No," Faber said. "We'll stay here for a few days."

THE LAST WORDS I remember hearing before the doo began to dribble into the fan were Faber pleasantly telling me, "We'll stay here a few days." Little did I know, but we were all headed south, and it was only hours till the wheels came off.

The next morning, the first thing was that the networks were going crazy — so crazy that it took me a while to figure out what they considered so dreadful. It was kind of charming, really, from the point of view of one away from it all in Roswell.

Faber was winning by anywhere from 49 to 64 percent, despite exit polls that split out 36 percent, 47 percent, with Faber pulling the usual 12 percent or so.

The voting machines were blamed, but they checked out perfectly. In state after state, irregardless of the maker of the voting machine or the type of ballot, Faber rolled up percents in the high fifties. Police were called out in numerous places to restore order, Weddell and Lawrence issued statements condemning everything, uncountable fights broke out between voters and poll workers and anybody else nearby. By the end of the day, on the West Coast, people mobbed in the streets and proclaimed Faber to be their president. They liked the idea. Probably even AnnaJanina liked the idea. At least in the West, the exit polls matched the actual vote.

The President himself called for national calm and asked for Roger Allen Faber to drop by the White House at his earliest convenience and have a chat.

In the motel, I said to him, "Roger, how did you do that? How did you win?"

"I just appealed to their desires for better times."

The pizza delivery person arrived at that point. With food in the room, I knew I wasn't going to get anything substantial out of him.

"So what are you going to do now?" I asked.

"Monday," he said, "we'll drive over to Albuquerque and we'll catch a plane for Washington."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"'We'?" I said.

He gave me the grin, a little nod, and the wink.

"You're my Number One, Quentin." Another wink. "It'll be exciting." I remember his saying that. I was highly complimented, considering it came from the President Elect, Roger Allen Faber. Except it wasn't real to me, at all, in the slightest. It was just a lot of sitting around in desolate motel rooms with Mr. Doodah. He ate the entire pizza, a large with everything.

Over the weekend, the people in Roswell addressed Faber as "Mr. President," and it was all very amusing for a while until I began to think maybe he really did win the election and maybe he was going to take me with him. Then I began to have the fear. On TV and in the papers, Faber was the only news there was. Was he really the president-elect? Did he win by some kind of fraud? Would we be arrested? Would I be indicted?

Saturday, several vans of reporters and two helicopters showed up, but Roger Allen Faber was not to be found. He left a message on his bed that read, "Gone for a walk. Be back late." People I saw on TV every day asked me every question they could think of, but after a couple of hours, they knew everything I knew about Faber, which wasn't much. They had lunch. They had dinner, and then they left, just as Faber strolled in from wherever.

"Let's have some blueberry waffles," he said. I remember that. He hid out all day in the desert to avoid reporters, and came back and wanted waffles. As usual, he ate them as though they were the best thing in the world. He enjoyed them so much, I wondered if I was missing something. Ha ha.

By now, the caca was starting to hit the fan at a pretty good rate.

Washington was a madhouse. From the time we got off the airplane till we got inside the White House, all we saw were people looking at us. Rows and rows of people lined the streets going crazy to see Faber. It was frightening to me.

At last, in the silence of the White House, with only a few people looking at us, we were led into a smallish room with puffy, rolled-arm furniture like my grandmother used to have. It was not my favorite kind of furnishing, but then it wasn't my house.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

President Watson came in after a few minutes, everyone shook hands, and the President spent a lot of pointless time asking about motels we stayed in, what we ate on the road, etc., etc., and then like he was trying to catch Faber off-guard, out of nowhere he asked, "Just how did you do it, Mr. Faber?" He smiled and nodded when he said this. "It was brilliant, whatever it was."

Faber did his grin and his heh-heh routine and said, "Well, sir, I had special help."

Watson nodded knowingly. "Ah," he said, "Jesus."

"No," Faber said, "not Jesus."

Watson nodded knowingly again. "I know what you mean," he said.

What a load. I'd been around Faber for a couple of months, and I knew that no one knew what he meant. Unless Watson had Extra Sensory Powers, which is doubtful, considering his legal problems, he was crapping all of us, and all of us knew it. But I digress.

We got a tour through a few rooms and made to feel like we should be kissing somebody's ring, saw this, saw that, not much of it memorable except it was like a rat's nest of people hurrying in all directions under bad lighting. The only memorable exchange I remember was this, in the Oval Office:

President: "It's a complicated job. Come in anytime and we'll go over a few things."

Faber (major grin): "I don't think we'll need to do that."

This could have been a.) arrogance, b.) the comment of a very smart person, or c.) a clue.

Now we fast forward, through all the ceremonial folderol, the oath, to the Inauguration Speech which was after the swearing in. Faber was the most talkative I'd ever seen—he took at least four minutes. Crucial parts, repeated over and over on TV, were these:

"Well.... I want to make this easy on all of us." Wink, grin, applause. "In traveling around America, I've discerned what Americans want." Discerned even. Maybe he even saw a harbinger or two.

Maybe he did discern two or three things, but I never heard him ask anybody anything, except where he could find a good restaurant.

"Americans want what everybody else around the world wants. They

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

want peace and quiet and protection against disaster, whether personal or national. Well, okay." Big, big grin. "I'll do that." Wild mad applause. "Now, you all of you have a good day." National approval rating: 78 percent.

Faber had a blank check, but as far as I knew, he had no plans to spend it. I'd never heard one major or even one trivial idea. Even though I had spent hours with him every day, I thought I might be missing something. Everybody else seemed to think everything was going along fine, so I just watched and tried to see what they saw. Faber was as friendly as a warm brassiere so everyone figured he could run the country. Morons with less charm had done it before him.

Whatever. I must say, that, by this time, my "This Is Weird" nerves had been totally fried. Flying saucers could have landed on the White House lawn and I'd think, "So? Is there an issue here? Are they littering?" I mean, six months ago I was two moves away from the farm section in the Bakersfield *HomeTown News*, and here I was, access to the President, living in the White House. I didn't feel lucky. I felt troubled.

The staff kind of loitered around and drank a lot of coffee and asked me questions I couldn't answer. On day two, Faber called in the Secret Service people and told them to keep absolutely everyone but me and the chef away from him. A lot of eyebrows went up at that one. Then he told them to let the switchboard know that he'd take only two calls a day — the first two that came in after 11 A.M. I suspect a lot of alarm bells were going off inside those clean-cut heads. Me, I was used to it.

I saw Faber several times a day, and once in a while had lunch with him. His desk was stacked with folders — several piles a foot or more high, but since I was there several times a day, as I said, I noticed that the files were never moved.

Faber was very charming through our lunches, and any political conversations went something like this:

Me: "I've been reading in the paper that things are getting tense between Belarus and the Ukraine. A lot of people think the U.S. should maybe do something."

Faber (as though waving away a fly): "Oh pish. It'll come to nothing."

And then he told me how much he liked the crab dishes.

I became stressed. Every time any of the press or staffers saw me, they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were on me like zits. But what did I know? Zip, zero, and nothing. Until that time I had never experienced anxiety like I read about in Psych 101. But I recognized the markers, and I had a lot of it.

After a couple of weeks I got extremely jumpy because I knew things were getting serious with the Belarus thing (not to mention the angry Chinese wanting to extend some agreement or other) and people always asked me a lot of intense questions I didn't know the slightest thing about, which they blamed me for.

"Mr. President," I said, "things are going to fly apart and a lot of people will get hurt or die if you don't do some of the things you're supposed to do to keep everybody safe, like you said. Mr. Faber?"

He reached over and put his hand over mine. "Quentin, son," he said, "you don't have to worry about a thing. You watch. No one's going to die." I remember I just stared at him. I was really afraid I was looking at a deeply mental case. "Here," he said. "Try this sauce. Butter-lemon with a touch of hoisin." And he shoved a plate of salad across at me. I could have strangled him. Not really, but stuttering Jesus, as they say. Those Belorussians had their guns out. People were lining up to die, and, of course, they had a million cheerleaders.

"Sir?" It was my final plea. "Please?"

He leaned toward me. I have to say, it was a bit creepy because Faber doesn't have the most assuring face when seen close up, being as prematurely old-looking as he is. But he leaned toward me and said, "Quentin, you should be happy. You're safe, it's very quiet here, there's food, warmth, and yet I sense you are anxious. Breathe deeply."

Now I actually did want to strangle him, but I breathed deeply and thought blood would run out of my ears, I was so infuriated, but it didn't.

And what do you know? The Ukrainians and the Belorussians apparently decided to do something else besides slaughter each other's civilians. Nothing happened. Faber continued to sit at his desk behind those untouched files and ate tremendous quantities of food. Actually I could see he was filling out a little and looking a bit healthier.

A necessary but boring side note should be added here to the effect that during the first two months of his term, the clamorous and vociferous demand grew daily for him to begin filling appointed offices. When the leaders of Congress waltzed in one day and told me they demanded he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

appoint a cabinet and a Vice President, I took the word to him and Faber did the grin and said, "I'll get right on it," and winked. When I told him the Senate at least wanted a Vice President, he said, "Well, okay, you're the Vice President." I went out and told everyone who wanted to know that Faber would soon appoint a cabinet but that he had no comment on the VP issue.

Within a few days, Faber called a Rose Garden press conference. Everybody but God showed up in person. At last Faber would speak! He might say something meaningful! He might explain what he had been doing all this time!

He walked briskly out, grinned at everyone, winked, and said, "Tomorrow, things are going to be just a little bit better."

That was it, the total show in a nutshell. We didn't know it at the time, but the fecus into the fan was now at full squirt.

Sure enough, the next day, stunned to the bone, in prisons across the country, wardens discovered that every prisoner who had been convicted of murder wasn't there anymore. Most of them disappeared during the night, depending in part on the particular time zone. And noteworthy is that they vanished completely, meaning *totally*, even with their DNA traces on their bedding, in the toilets, etc. There were unconfirmed reports that their names vanished off all prison records and none of their paperwork could be located. The country now had prison vacancies.

I was asked five hundred times if that "miracle" was what Faber had meant about things getting better. Faber's comment: "That isn't an edifying question." (Maybe it was a harbinger, though.) "Either answer I give will cause a hundred more questions." Grin, end of conversation. So that's what I told everyone, quote, "Either answer I give..." etc. I dropped the edifying part.

Everyone went completely guano. There were big headlines like,

Republicans Enraged: Did Faber Rescue Murderers?
Insanity An Impeachable Offense, Says Jurist
Military Denies Invasion Plans for White House

The next notable event was a guy named Jay J. Bookmander wrote a little column which observed that convicted murderers might not be the only ones disappearing. He had been reading the news and he connected the dots like smart people can sometimes do. To wit:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

- The recent failure of many muggings due to the mugger suddenly "vanishing."
- The recent alleged death of candidate Evan Lawrence in a white water "accident," just as he prepared to shoot off a hundred subpoenas to Faber and me, *me* of all people. Lawrence's body, to no one's surprise, was never found.
- The curious ability of many groups, from labor unions to nations, to be able to successfully negotiate their disagreements away, although they often had to go through several teams of negotiators due to "drop outs."
- Nothing of note happened in the Middle East.
- The recent absence from work of many heavily tattooed persons.
- The recent unaccountable absence of people in many walks of life, nearly all of whom were connected in some way to the "intentional or semi-intentional application of violence," according to Bookmander, including, for instance, known criminals, incarceration officers, soldiers, slaughterhouse workers, three members of the Senate, and twelve from the House.
- The realization that events similar to all these were occurring around the world.

I brought this to Faber's attention. He glanced at it and said, "I'll bet people are a little happier about these things."

I asked him if he had anything to do with these things and he said it was too soon to say.

"Too soon to say?!"

"Quentin, could you ask Ms. Kan to come in? Her paella is just marvelous. I'll have her make you some."

That's me, quizzing the Prez on the biggest story in the world, getting all the news.

Now I am going to account for the occurrence of the important part.

It took a while for the Bookmander article to get traction, about three weeks, give or take, but when it did, people in the media became inflamed, resulting in a substantial portion of the public becoming inflamed, to which inflammation their public servants in Congress wrote up what they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

called "unflinching demands on the chief executive." I just said "Ho ho," when I heard about that. It didn't seem like a smart thing to me.

They unmothballed Joseph J. Weddell to stand in front of a joint session to read the "unflinching demands." On every channel, the country saw Weddell start coolly, grow warm, become outraged, warn everyone to arm themselves, then he went totally "mandrill," red in the face, waving his arms around, saying Faber was a national threat — and then —

Blip.

That was exactly the noise on the microphones: *Blip*. And Joseph J. Weddell just blipped right out of existence, right in front of the world, as his clothes fell into a wadded pile. There was silence in the house that day.

I went to Faber. "What — What is going on here, sir!"

"Too soon to say," he said.

I cleverly asked him, "When will it be time?"

And get this: His answer: "When nobody cares anymore."

Like I said, was this man cryptical and enigmatic or not? Sometimes I had the creepy feeling that if I was a B+ instead of a C+, I might have got it a little sooner.

WEDDELL'S DISAPPEARANCE certainly quieted the critics. For a day. Then they were back, vicious and even more outraged, on TV, radio, and Internet. That lasted about two days.

It went like this: On the TV, the radio, and the Internet, with some word halfway through their outraged lips or through their outraged typing fingers, they blipped out of existence, just like Weddell. You could hear it: Blip...blip...blip.... Then a few people recognized the obvious and spread the word that it was maybe time to shut up.

When I walked around the White House halls, the staffers (God knows what they did anymore) stopped drinking coffee and looked at me like I was waving a death ray in their faces. It was quite discomfiting and disquieting for me.

Anyway, after The Weddell Show, the silence was big enough that even I could hear the caca storm coming across the horizon, full bore, clouds five miles high. One could only hope that people had their drawers

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on tight. I did. I was getting into my mental health kit every day for a while. Here's how it went, approximately:

Starting about March 1 — Hundreds of Christian leaders proclaimed the Rapture was upon us, and congregations of twenty, or two hundred, or two thousand stood outside their churches or by riversides (a popular venue), day after day, arms raised and pleaded to be taken, and they were, with big rattling blips that could be heard for a mile. No one could even guess the total number. Maybe they got raptured up or maybe they just weren't anymore, like Weddell, et al. The Catholics seemed to be a bit skeptical about this and let the Protestants offer themselves up without comment. Faber also had no comment.

March 11 — Every SWAT team within a hundred miles of Washington was brought in to storm the White House. "Ha ha," once again. About twenty seconds after they began, it was all over. The poorer kids swarmed out of the neighborhoods and ran away with a lot of black clothes and a lot of dangerous weapons. One must plan for unintended consequences, as my philosophy professor told us. No comment from Faber, but he did smile.

March 18 — Several patriots from Langley Air Force Base, on their own, it was said, tried to drive a couple of F-14s over the White House and unload some devastation there. However, the planes flew uneventfully low over the back lawn, headed out to sea, and went down, pilotless. Faber's comment? "Hm."

April 12 — The Serviles of Submission came to D.C. No one expected 250,000 of them to show up, utterly silent, walking very slowly through the streets about ten abreast, yet no two of them touched, which was against their beliefs. This was advertised as a way to avoid being disappeared: Wear something white, be quiet, and move slowly — the latest formula for success. Unfortunately, shortly after one P.M, when people were probably cranky about not having lunch and having to be quiet for so long, the Messiah's Maidens ran through the streets, as they do, shrieking and knocking anybody aside who got in their way. My guess is that the Maidens made sure the Serviles were in their way, because they went into them like lawnmowers, and a lot of the Serviles suddenly became not so servile and "belied their name," as I heard someone say.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By evening, there were still groups fighting in the outlying neighborhoods. Fires and looting were involved and a certain amount of gunfire. Nobody could say when it began to quieten, but by nine P.M. the streets were silent and the fires had been extinguished. White billowy clothes, sheets mainly, blew around the streets for a few days before they were all picked up. Need I excogitate upon this?

During this time, I spoke to Faber nearly every day. This is a composite of what we said, from my notes:

"President Faber, I cannot help but notice that a lot of people are just evaporating, if you know what I mean."

"Oh yes," he said. Often he had to finish chewing what he was chewing before he could answer, and, as I remember, most of our conversations were held as he was eating or just starting or just finishing eating. He ate things I couldn't identify, not that that's bad, necessarily, but the man would eat anything. "You know, there go those problems everyone was complaining about," he said. Big grin and more eating.

"But President Faber, these people are, I guess, *dead!* That bothers me!" I didn't exactly shout, but I felt I needed to intensify my expression.

"No, no." He halfway stood up as he kind of hovered his hands over me, kind of like he was holding down my "aura." "No one is dying, Quentin. Heavens, I couldn't do that! Great heavens!"

"But they're gone! They aren't here anymore! And to tell the truth, I think you yourself might be making these people disappear!"

Hold on. Here it comes:

"Well, of course I am, but they're not *dying!* That would be awful."

"Then," I asked, "if they're not dead, *where are they*?"

He looked a little dumbfounded, I must say.

"Well..." dither, dither..."they aren't in Philadelphia!" Faber had actually made a funny, but under the circumstances I thought it was in poor taste. "Seriously," he said, "they aren't anywhere."

"Is this a philosophy class now? Tell me in words a C+ guy would understand."

Faber looked like he was thinking very hard. "Well, the transition is pretty quick — somewhere around thirty-seven to the minus four seconds. That's pretty quick. So as I see it, one should live a happy, carefree

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

life and forget the next thirty-seven to the minus four seconds. You'd never know if you weren't here anymore."

I could see there was a certain hideous logic to that. I thought fast. "But you're taking away people, friends and family! They don't *like* that!"

"Out of sight, out of mind. They won't remember for long." He kept his jolly face on the whole time, but he did keep eating.

"Wait a minute." I caught an implication there. "Wait. You said they wouldn't remember for long? Why not?"

"Memories fade fairly quickly these days."

"You're going to change their memories? Like erase people out of other people's memories? You can do that?"

He leaned forward a little and lowered his voice. "That young lady you were seeing? What was her name?"

I knew it, but my mind was spinning in other directions. I was distracted.

"Do you remember?" he asked. "Take a moment. You were very close, you said."

I couldn't quite pull it together. Anna...Anita? Anita Polenta...? Anna ...whatever. Her name wasn't there. But I kept a picture of her in my wallet, yet when I checked, oh boy, it wasn't there and it should have been there.

Then I got another implication. If he kind of meant that when somebody disappeared, the memories other people had of them were wiped away, then didn't that mean Anna-whatever had been disappeared?

"I'm sorry," Faber said, apparently reading my mind, which I did not like. He did appear genuinely sorry. "Her friend Henry...I regret telling you this. She took all his money, and in despair he swam out into the ocean, there at Huntington Beach, and was never seen again. She bought herself a nice car."

I couldn't believe it! Not Anna-Anita-whatever! Woman of my dreams, just six months ago!

"Her memory will fade," he said, patting my hand across his desk. "You'll be happier."

"But Mr. Faber," I said, "even after somebody's disappeared, people will have possessions of who they lost...pictures, movies, mementos, so they'll grieve for those people, won't they?" I was sure I had him there.

He shook his head as he smiled a little bit. "Not for long, no. You

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

didn't lose her picture, by the way. First, you had it, then, thirty-seven to the power of minus four seconds later, you didn't. "

It was a cliché; I knew it; I said it anyway: "Who gave you the right to play God?! Where do you get off deciding who gets to be here and who remembers what?"

"Well, son, I don't know anything about 'rights' or if they even apply here, and I certainly don't know anything about acting like God. I wouldn't know where to begin."

I recall actually spluttering at this point. I had never spluttered before.

"Cookie?" he asked, pushing a tray toward me.

It was those white puffy cookies with coconut on the outside so they look like a big gobs of mold. I probably just stared at them like they were poison.

"Quentin, this is what I do. It's what I'm good at. There are a few that are better, but...."

"You're treating us like lab rats, aren't you, like we did in psychology class!"

"It's insightful to take the rat's point of view. Quentin, you should believe that I would never, ever hurt anyone. There are very strict rules I have to follow. But I'm not going to tell you what they are."

Then we just looked at each other for a very long half-minute. He looked uncle-y and I imagine I looked pretty stupid because I was trying to think of something to say and I just couldn't. I guess I was "flusterated," as my mother used to say.

"Well," he said, "on to other business. And ask Ms. Kan to hurry along lunch."

I took that as my cue to leave, which I did, and went directly to my mental health emergency kit and got relieved, if you know approximately what I mean.

It took me a while, but it was at this point I realized that my life and involvement with Faber had gotten way, way, way out of hand. Who was I to be his main liaison to the outside? Why did I get asked all the questions? And now that here I was in the White House and we had people blipping away right and left — well, I'm sorry, but my frail brain does not register those conditions as part of my "frame of reality," as it's called, so I was upset and alarmed, but I was not making rabid phone calls to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strangers (when the phone worked) or screaming down the streets like those rude lesbian women, because a big part of my brain JUST DIDN'T GET IT. But there I was and what did I think of this unreal predicament? My brain would not think of unreal predicaments, so I called my mother.

"The TV doesn't work, Son. Can you do something about that?"

"Probably not, Mom. How are you doing? You have food, water, electricity?"

"Oh, we're just fine. You know, the funniest thing, people don't seem to use money that much these days. Even the stores, they used to take whatever money people had, but they don't even do that anymore. People just go on about their jobs as usual. Your Mr. Faber, he's done that, hasn't he? We're so proud of you."

"I think he did it, Mom. It's kind of hard to tell."

"You know that Mr. Raloff down the street, how cranky he was? Well, he's gone now. I guess he moved. Everyone's so glad about it. Remember when you were a little boy how he ran over your...what was it he ran over? Your bicycle...did he run over something?"

And so on. In short, Mom was having a pretty decent time of it, even if she only remembered half her life.

That gave me food for thought.

"Sir? Mr. President?" I said to him one day over Spamwiches, which he relished but I could barely choke down, "what do you do all day?"

"I monitor issues," he said precisely. And he gave me a quick well-fed grin, which it certainly was by now, and a little chuckle. "I believe this food is having a rejuvenating effect on me, don't you?" He held his head up a little higher over his untouched files, so I could see. He did look a little better. It wasn't dramatic, but he didn't look ready for the embalmer, as he did when we were out campaigning.

I told him he looked younger. It pleased him.

By now, as you might have guessed, the fan was a turbofan, the excretata was the excretata of meat-eating animals, and it was being shot into said turbofan at Niagara volumes. But no, wait — there's more: There's proof positive that no one should ever say things couldn't get any worse, because they did.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rumors filtered around that there were new rivers coming out of the mountains, going right through neighborhoods and shopping centers, sweeping them away and really messing things up. Forests replaced some of those wheat fields in the Midwest, and the mega-farmers went berserk until a few of them blipped. The changes happened in other odd ways, too, like in the night or when nobody was around, because no one could actually claim to seeing them happen. And if, for example, some apartment block was going to disappear, for some reason, all the people would just happen to be gone shopping or something. In places, new buildings appeared overnight. At least that was the rumor.

The only thing like that that I saw was a strip of apple orchard that appeared about a quarter of a mile from us. I went over and looked. They were mature trees, apple trees, with decayed leaves on the ground as though from the previous years. There are some things in life you look at and you just walk away. I looked, and I walked away.

I remember I was really calm for some reason, but it was the kind of calm I didn't much care for, because it wasn't a very deep calm.

"Mr. Faber," I said, "what do we have going on now? Landscaping?"

He did the heh-heh and wobbled his head back and forth and said, "You could call it that." He pushed aside a plate of steak bones and wiped his mouth with his napkin. He had lately been eating a lot of meat. "Landscaping, yes. I love the food here. You people don't appreciate what you have."

"How long is this going to go on? How much more are you going to do?"

"Till I win."

Ah ha! An answer! *Till he wins.* An answer which meant absolutely nothing to me.

Then I thought of a good question: "How will you know if you've won?"

"Can't tell you," he said amiably. "Send Ms. Kan in, will you? Those were the best pork chops."

He made me really tired. He had more eating to do while the world was losing its memory. I slumped off to my kit.

In my unprofessional observation of human nature during this series of events, I would guess that about 35 percent of the population "went

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

guano" when pressure of an unpredictable nature was applied to their lives. People devised charms, spells, meditation chants, tattoos of prime numbers on their "chakras," drinks, foods, and sacrifices to make them safe. They cut off body parts, little things mostly. They tried sacrificing animals, but from what I heard, that went *really* badly for the participants. A little pressure and we're right back in the Dark Ages. This comes as a major surprise to whom?

After a couple of uneventful days, I went to Faber and said to him, "I want to go out and look around and I want to know if I'm going to have a thirty-seven to the minus four-second experience. Am I going to disappear?"

"Well, of course not." This day he seemed to be eating pastries with a lot of chocolate on them, and red things. Faber certainly had been filling out a good bit during his "presidency." He didn't look skeletal anymore and his wrinkled skin wasn't very wrinkled at all. "Look around," he told me. "Give me your personal opinion about what you see, how the people are taking the adjustment."

I had to ask. It was time. "President Faber? You aren't really human, are you?"

I got the "heh-heh" a couple of times while he looked down at his plate and seemed actually bashful. "Well, I am, yes. Everything you see is one hundred percent human. But there are — " He did the heh-heh again with a head shake, " — there are things you don't see. It's nothing to worry about. I wouldn't worry. No one should worry."

"Sir? People are out there vanishing! Their homes are vanishing, probably as we speak, and every minute they wonder when they're going to die! People are going crazy about this!"

He put on his serious look. "Well, you tell them they shouldn't. No one's dying. Tell them that they worry entirely too much."

What could anyone say to that? I said I'd tell them.

It was a strange walk. The first thing noticeable was the lack of tourists. Two of them stared through the front fence. Everything was also very neat. No papers blowing around, no drink cups on the grass — it was exceedingly clean.

Nextly, I noticed that many of the stores were empty — not necessarily

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

closed, but definitely empty. Some, however, were open and had a few customers. I went in a fur store and I looked around and saw they had no furs. They had jackets and coats and scarves — but no furs.

Without going into the details of this encounter, suffice it to say that the proprietor, her single staff member, and the two shoppers were extraordinarily pleasant. "Can we help you with *this*?" and "Can we help you with *that*?" They had no furs, she said, for ethical reasons. One of the customers whispered to me under her breath, "It might not be safe, you know."

Trying to seem like just another person, I asked, "So how are you holding up with all...these changes? Any special problems come up?"

The proprietor shrugged nonchalantly and said, "Not really, but it takes some getting used to. I never lock the doors anymore. Somebody tries to boost something, I'll find it under their empty clothes right in the doorway."

"Are there problems where you live?" a customer asked me, apparently deeply concerned.

"No," I said. "I can't complain. But I should get out more."

"You should. It's really safe."

The farther I walked, the more I saw of the same. It was a low-key kind of happy, like quiet satisfaction. But I kept thinking about all the people who lost people. In a little restaurant, I had some coffee with two older couples.

I asked them, "Did you lose anybody in the disappearances?"

They all knitted their brows in thought.

"No," one of the men said. "Well, just one I heard of. My wife's niece."

"No, dear, it was *your* niece," the woman next to him said.

"I had a brother disappear yesterday," the other man said. "I wanted to kill him myself, so overall, speaking only for us, it's not too bad."

So there it was. They liked it.

On a wild hare, I decided to go to the *Washington Post* building to see what some of the reporters thought about it. After all, their job was to observe and report, and assuredly they had observed things I hadn't seen.

To make a longish story short, I could only find six people there, and one was a luncheonette worker who only had white bread and yellow cupcakes, and one was a former bus driver sort of living in the building. I did, however, locate one reporter. This woman, Claire Kronski, a little

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dark-haired woman who acted like she had methedrine for blood, gave me several earfuls. Like A.) there were *a lot* of people gone, about half the population probably, but it was anybody's guess. For B.) the economy was practically nonexistent, but people seemed to be getting along all right, aside from the boredom, which led her to C.) there was no news, which outraged her. "With everybody being so [bad word] nice!" she said and then slapped her hands over her mouth. Then she moved her hands, smiled really nicely, and said something like "With everyone so darned nice, what's to report?"

"But they don't seem all that unhappy," I said.

"No, they're not unhappy, but it's like they're dazed. You saw that, right?"

I admitted they seemed a little drifty, but more pleased than sad or alarmed.

"Bunch of walking lobotomies."

We talked for a while in her office, getting acquainted, about where we'd been and what we'd done, and we talked about Faber (whom I pretended to only have heard of). As we talked about those things, I noticed in the parts of her life she didn't remember some things that to me seemed very memorable. To wit: The name of her first husband, the name of her first husband's son by a previous marriage (whom she had raised since he was six!), and finally, the origin of a six-inch long scar on her upper arm. Frankly, I do not understand these lapses of memory about the boy and the scar, although forgetting the name of a previous spouse does not seem all that peculiar; there could be psychological reasons.

Before drawing great big conclusions, when I left Claire (after promising to visit again in the undistant future), I collected extra data. I made it a point to be ultra friendly to half a dozen other people that afternoon, asked them questions about themselves, and similarly, without going into the boring details of it, it seemed to me they all had their lapses. So as I meandered back to the White House and my presidential friend, these are the conclusions I drew:

1. People's memories had lost information.

2. The lost information seems mainly to be the people's names who vanished and any memories associated with those people (which was a lot of stuff).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

3. Faber's cryptic remarks about people forgetting those who vanished led me to believe that he is distinctly responsible.

How does he do these things??? And most troublesomely, I had to face what was staring me in the face, namely that people didn't seem to mind these things that had happened. Friends and family vanished, their memories were wiped away, the histories of their lives were yanked away overnight, and THEY LIKED IT, like a bunch of pod people! And apparently I was the only one (besides Faber) who knew all this. I was in a quandary. I felt disconcertedness and indeterminate emotions.

I JUST CAME RIGHT OUT with it. "How do you do these things, Mr. President? Especially the memories."

I never could get over how he looked just exactly like someone's slightly-out-of-it uncle — never ill-tempered, wagging and nodding his head just a little too much, and having this voice that would be perfect for recording children's stories. That's how he came across, even when he explained about making millions of people disappear, and that's how he was now.

"Well, Quentin, I'd love to tell you how I do it, but truthfully I don't really know how it works. I do know how to do what I want to do, but how it actually happens...? Not my field." Big shrug. "I'm sure you use things every day, and you don't know how they work. Car, microwave, your digestive system...."

He had me there.

"But," I said, "you are making the memories vanish."

"Well, yes. It's for the best. It really is."

"How far are you going to go with that? You could make us all idiots."

He cocked his head and gave me a wry grin. "We better hope I remember to turn it off in time." Faber had made a second funny, and it was quite a bit scary.

For the next week, I walked the neighborhoods, sometimes going three or four miles one direction or another, while I talked to people about who they knew but didn't see anymore. What did I find? Well, as my Dad would say, before he died, "Jesus H. I. J. K. Ryst."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

To summarize, I will reproduce one conversation that, as far as I'm concerned, just about sums up the state of affairs. One evening during this time, I found a note I'd once written with AnnaJanina's name and phone number on it that Faber hadn't made disappear yet. So I called her parents one evening when I unexpectedly found a phone that worked. I must in all honesty, however, state at the beginning that AnnaJanina was pretty vague in my memory and I no longer had much feeling about her. I put the phone on "Record" so I know this is exactly how it went:

Her mother, Mrs. Miller, answered. "Why, yes, Quentin, how good to hear from you. Of course I remember you."

"How is AnnaJanina doing these days?"

"AnnaJanina.... Well...she's not around."

"Do you know where she is, Mrs. Miller?"

"Let's see.... You know she was here not too long ago. Let me think." There was a big pause. "You know, she must not have told me."

"Mrs. Miller, I wanted to get AnnaJanina a present for her birthday — do you know what date that is?" I thought that was very sly of me.

"Oh no, I don't know that. I don't remember I ever asked her. Do you want me to get back to you on that?"

She hadn't asked her? Her daughter? Creepiness entered the conversation.

"No, never mind. One last thing, Mrs. Miller. How did you feel when AnnaJanina left? Were you sad?"

"Sad? Oh no. She just moved on, you know. People do that these days."

At that point, I couldn't help myself. "Mrs. Miller, AnnaJanina is your daughter!" I exclaimed. "And you don't know when her birthday is?!"

"Oh no, Quentin. I have no daughter. AnnaJanina is a nice young woman I knew for a while. We did a few things together, but I didn't know her all that well."

"Thanks Mrs. Miller," I said. I hung up fast and got the great big box of don't-lose-your-mind shakes. It took me a good hour to settle down.

That Faber was into details. It wasn't right that Mrs. Miller couldn't even remember her daughter. At that very moment it occurred to me that although I had no particular feelings for her, I remembered when AnnaJanina and I met, what we did then, first time we kissed, little day-trips we took, when she borrowed that thousand dollars from me, a lot of stuff. Except,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when I thought about it, I had a hard time remembering what she looked like. So Faber, for whatever reason, had only done a partial wipe on me.

During this time, I also saw Claire several times, and each time I saw her she was a little more agitated and each time quite a bit angrier. She would storm around her office and out in the corridor, holding her head and shouting about how we were all losing our minds or something. Her main theory was that there was an airborne virus that made us all crazy so that we imagined there used to be people here who never existed. She was also on to the memory loss thing. She thought President Faber had a major case of whatever it was.

"Look at this!" She was outraged again.

She shoved a sheet of newsprint at me. It had the *Washington Post* banner, but there was only one story on the page, which Claire wrote:

No News Today: Nothing Happening
by Claire Kronski

Once again, there is nothing to report.

Communications with other parts of the country and the world are erratic, but what we hear is that nothing is happening anyplace else either.

Suspension of publication of this newspaper has become highly probable.

Please let us know of anything that might be of interest to our readers. (Hand-delivered items only.)

Feel free to draw on the rest of this page.

"And look at this! Here! I had a picture here!" She pointed to a corner of her desk. "But I can't remember who it was! Look, see! You can see in the dust where it was! Do I have children? I don't remember! Do I even have a [f-word] address?! As far as I know, I live in this cubicle! *This is not [f-word] right!*" Claire became a bit coarse when she got wound up. She could be very expressive.

Her office neighbor rolled around the corner in his chair. He looked as unrattled as I could imagine a person could ever look. "Hi," he said. "I'm Chuck. It's a reality slippage," he said without emotion and with a lot of nodding. "It explains everything. Reality slippage." Then he rolled away.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"[Really bad word]!" Claire shouted and threw something against the wall where it did not break. "I don't want to die with my brains vacuumed out! *I worked for those memories! They're mine!*" She was crying now.

I put my arms around her for a minute and it was at that point that I noticed there was no longer any dust-image of the missing picture frame on the corner of her desk and neither one of us had touched it. I didn't tell Claire this.

That Faber was definitely into details. If he weren't so weird and like someone's charming old uncle, I could see how a person in my position might think Faber was God, or something, to do the things he did. But I didn't think that. Out on the campaign trail I'd heard him flush the toilet too many times during the night for him to be a deity.

Whatever he was, it was time for more chitchat with the Prez.

THERE HE WAS, behind the same stacks of folders, the grin on his face, a plate of finger foods under his chin. He was looking positively robust. It went about like this:

"Mr. President."

"Quentin. It's always good to see you."

"Mr. President, I've been talking to people, and I think you've been dialing down their memories too far. A lady told me that she had spent her life working for her memories, and she was really indignant about not having them anymore. I think you should rethink what you're doing."

"Well, if we take it down a little further, she won't remember she had memories."

"Sir! Don't! Why would you do that?"

"To see how it would affect tangential parameters. I don't know *every*thing. But she would be happier. I'm sure of that."

I think I spluttered again. "You wouldn't really do it, sir!"

"Do you know how many people are very, very satisfied with themselves, regardless of what pathetic tragedies they had turned their lives into? They're happy people now, Zen-like, and peaceful."

"Zombies,you mean. They walk around like zombies with half their brains missing. Mr. President, please, as some kind of friend, could you not do this anymore?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Big shrug. "Not yet. Soon, but not yet. We have a bit more to go, Quentin."

"How much more, sir?"

"Observe and learn. Canape?"

Cryptic, sphinxlike, perplexing, and conundrumatic.

Sometimes I envy people who just lose it and go screaming out a window.

I must've got impulsive. I think I was angrier than the above conversation might indicate. Anyway, I went out to the corridor where the Secret Service always prowled around, and I said to the nearest one, whose name tag ID'd him as Barry Olson, "How's it going?"

"Another day, another dolor," he said.

"Can I borrow your gun?"

"I thought you'd never ask." A revealing comment. He handed it over.

First, let me say that I did not want to do what I did.

I put the gun under my coat and casually strolled back into the Oval Office.

Faber looked up at me, the grin faltering a bit in his surprised expression.

"Dammit!" he said, slapping the desk top with the flat of his hand.

When I took the gun out and started to point it at him, it dissolved in my hand strangely. I say strangely because it more or less dissolved out of sight, yet for a few moments I could still feel it. Then, weirdly, its weight felt like it melted through my fingers.

"Well," he said. "Hm."

"Are you going to make me disappear now?"

"No. Game's over." Then he stood up, then he said, "Time to go."

"What game? Time to go where?"

"When someone tries to kill me, game's over and it's time to go." Faber did one of his big shrugs. "But it was a personal best."

"Time to go?! Personal best?! After everything you did here? You wrecked this place! People don't remember half their lives!"

"But they're happy. You people do pretty well with almost no memory. That's something you might want to remember for future reference." He chuckled robustly about that and held out his hand for me

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to shake. He had on his Faber grin, and his teeth looked pretty good and he didn't look eighty years old. He did, however, smell of shrimp.

"You're leaving," I said.

He nodded. "Soon as you shake my hand."

"You're leaving and we get to clean up the mess?"

"I keep telling you, you don't have to worry about it," he said, hand still out, "Some questions just won't be answered to your satisfaction."

What choice did I have? I shook his hand and it did that same funny disappearing-heavy-draining-away thing as the gun, and then I was standing there alone.

Now I want to take just a moment and say that there is a good possibility that somewhere along the line I became mental and don't know about it. But, get this: the next thing that happened to me was I was on a park bench with a brown paper lunch bag beside me and a nice cheese and pickle sandwich in my hand.

It was a pleasant day with sun, pigeons, and nice-looking women walking by, which I was busy actively appreciating. I should also emphasize that there were a lot of people around, and everything looked normal in the old-fashioned pre-Faber days. In fact, at that moment, I don't think I'd ever heard of Faber, although that is another one of those questions where I'm not going to get a satisfactory answer.

Anyway, after a couple bites of the sandwich, this youngish middle-aged gentleman came up to me and sat down.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Denmore."

"Yes?"

"We've met before." He stuck out his hand for me to shake, which, for whatever reason, I did.

In that moment he shook my hand, I remembered it all — a six-month movie in two seconds flat. It was Faber who sat next to me, a young middle-aged Faber who was actually a little handsome.

"No," he said, "you're not crazy."

"Mr. Faber?"

Indeed, I felt crazy. Giving it second thoughts, I couldn't really tell if I had remembered those months out of a dream, or if they "actually" happened, in some way or other.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm not Roger Allen Faber this time." He leaned back and looked out across the street at the people and the shops. For reasons unknown, a little scuffle broke out between a couple of men over in front of a deli. A bystander shoved one of them to the sidewalk while most others scattered. A few kicks were exchanged. Faber made a "tsk" sound with a little head-shake.

He turned toward me and gave me that familiar almost-grin. "I was so close," he said. "Are you finished with that?" He nodded at my sandwich.

I handed it over, with dread.

"Mm. Tasty," he said after the first bite, animatedly, unlike the other Faber. He gave my knee a little slap. "Know what, Quentin? I feel lucky. We're going to go at it a little different way this time. We'll try it as a major contender and do things more the regular way." He rapidly consumed most of the sandwich, mmming several times in the process.

What could I say? Remembering what was going to happen made me feel exceedingly grim.

"Sir, what happens if you win?"

"Major surprise." He dropped the end of the sandwich into his mouth and continued to grin at me before he swallowed it whole, without chewing it once.

He gave my shoulder a little one-hand shake. "Quentin, really, don't worry about a thing. You're in good hands."

"What will you let me remember?"

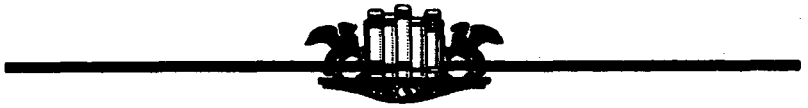
"You'll never remember you forgot anything. But you do get to be my Number One again. It's the rules."

I just sat there, empty lunch bag in my lap, empty feeling all through me, with unspeakable knowledge, on a beautiful day.

The daffodils were out.

"The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there."
—L.P. Hartley. *The Go-Between*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Host, by Stephenie Meyer, Little, Brown, 2008, $25.99.

WHAT A pleasant surprise this book is. You could say that Meyer's fourth novel — her first for adults — eschews all the long-winded teen angst of her Young Adult *Twilight* series, but I think she simply had a different target audience, and so wrote a different kind of a book. It's just as long, but instead of being filled with lengthy descriptions of the minutiae and drama of teenage romance, it explores adult relationships, friendship, and the morality of an alien invasion.

When the novel opens, it's been years since the "Souls" (what the parasitic aliens call themselves) have invaded and taken over earth. The Souls are placed in a human host and take over the body while suppressing the human's mind. Our viewpoint character is a Soul named Wanderer who, when she wakes in the body of a young woman named Melanie, finds that her human host isn't so easily controlled.

The aliens have conquered Earth, but there are still pockets of resistance — individuals and small groups of violent humans that still need to be assimilated into the greater Soul society. Melanie, we learn, along with her younger brother Jamie and lover Jared, have all been in hiding from the Souls. Though she's been captured, she'll do anything to protect and return to Jamie and Jared, and her sheer determination and strength of will allow her to resist Wanderer's complete control.

Souls live forever unless their host body dies, and Wanderer is a rarity among Souls because she has lived on nine worlds. She's well-practiced in taking charge of her host, and though she's surprised by Melanie's resistance, she doesn't expect it to last. But then a funny thing happens. Through sharing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Melanie's memories, Wanderer finds herself falling in love with Jared and wanting to protect Melanie's brother Jamie.

What follows is a fascinating love triangle that gets even more complicated when Wanderer/Melanie meet another member of the resistance and he falls for her — the Wanderer personality, not Melanie.

If you're familiar with the *Twilight* books, and then read what I've written above, you might think that this is a romance novel trying to disguise itself as sf, but you'd be wrong. Meyers is interested in human relationships, and does a fine job exploring them, but she also does an excellent job of setting up the aliens and then extrapolating what their presence means on Earth. *The Host* isn't watered-down sf; it's simply another take on it.

I've read somewhere that Meyers doesn't read sf or horror, nor has she seen any genre films. While it begs the question as to why she writes in either genre, it does mean that she brings something different to the table. Her vampires and werewolves — and her aliens in this book — aren't different for the sake of being different (as a genre writer might attempt, staking out her own niche). They're different because she comes to them without the baggage of familiarity, approaching these tropes of our genre with a fresh eye that I find very engaging.

For adult readers, *The Host* is definitely the place to start with her books.

Elfland, by Freda Warrington, Tor Books, 2009, no price listed yet.

Freda Warrington's new novel is another fat book, but unlike Meyers, she's very familiar with the conventions of the genre. In *Elfland*, she presents a world in which the fairies of folk lore — she calls them Aetherials — live alongside us as though they are human, only we don't know it. Ho-hum, you might think, and in lesser hands you might be right.

Magical beings living hidden alongside us has pretty much become its own subgenre. They might be fairies, or vampires, or werewolves, but the books usually boil down to a familiar template: human discovers the secret, is drawn to or repulsed by the magical beings, his or her life is put into turmoil.

Warrington avoids this by having the points of view come from the Aetherials. She doesn't so much focus on conflict between the races

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

— though some aspect of that is still present — as she does the complicated relationships of the Aetherials themselves, in particular, the Fox and Wilder families who live in the small English village of Cloudcroft.

Lawrence Wilder is a rich jeweler, and the Gatekeeper to the inner realms of Elfland that the Aetherials need to visit on a regular basis to maintain the magical elements of their life-force. His wife Ginny has left him. His one son Jon is a drug addict, for all that he looks like he stepped from a Pre-Raphaelite painting; the other is Sam, who's always in trouble.

Down the hill from their stately, if somewhat rundown, Stonegate Manor, is the cottage of the Foxes: Auberon, the local Aetherial community's voice of calm reason; his wife Jessica who used to sing in a folk-rock band; oldest son Matthew who does everything he can to deny his Aetherial heritage; daughter Rose, enamored with the natural world and the handsome Jon who doesn't even know she exists; and lastly the younger son Lucas who tends to tag along with either or both of his older siblings.

Elfland takes place over a decade or so, opening when Lawrence has to close the Gates because of a danger he says will come through and destroy them all. What's unclear is if the danger is to Lawrence himself, who is carrying all sorts of hidden demons, or the Aetherials in general. All the community knows is that the Gates are closed to them, and they're outraged.

The book starts slowly, but as we come to know the two families, along with their human and Aetherial friends, we are drawn into their lives and relationships, and what begins as a somewhat pastoral novel set in this small English village becomes a real page-turner and a very magical book.

It helps that the principal viewpoint character is Rose. She's a terrific character in her own right — warm, earthy, coming of age in a time when her community is changing drastically. But because of her connections to the other characters, it makes it easier for the reader to keep track of the large cast and make sense of their complicated relationships with one another.

I said at the outset that this sort of hidden-race-among-us storyline is becoming rather commonplace in our genre, but Warrington makes it her own, and even the most jaded fantasy reader will quickly fall under the spell of her characters

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the warm, intimate voice Warrington uses to tell us their stories.

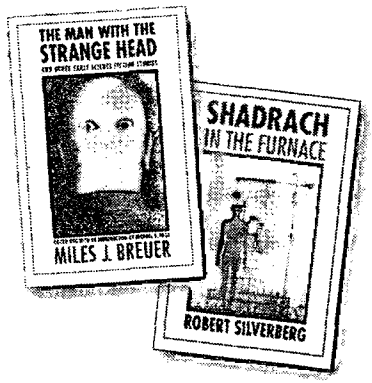
Highly recommended.

In the Small, by Michael Hague, Little, Brown, 2008, $12.99.

In Odd We Trust, by Queenie Chan & Dean Koontz, Del Rey, 2008, $10.95.

Regular readers of this column could be forgiven for thinking that this reviewer considers any graphic novel a superior accomplishment. But if I've given that impression, it's only because I tend to concentrate on what I think are the better examples. To give a little perspective, here are a couple that didn't work as well for me.

I've enjoyed Michael Hague's illustrative work in the past and the concept of this new book of his (one day every human being is shrunk to under six inches tall) is terrific. The plot's fine, too, and Hague manages to capture both the gruesome and the charming aspects of this change. With six inch tall pilots and drivers, airborne planes crash, as do cars, buses, trains — not a pretty situation. Getting down from the top floor of an office building is a real challenge. As is simply finding something to wear.



A BISON ORIGINAL

The Man with the Strange Head and Other Early Science Fiction Stories

MILES J. BREUER

Edited and with an introduction by Michael R. Page

$21.95 paper

BISON FRONTIERS OF IMAGINATION SERIES

Shadrach in the Furnace

ROBERT SILVERBERG

$16.95 paper

BISON FRONTIERS OF IMAGINATION SERIES

*For complete descriptions and to order, visit us online!

BISON BOOKS University of Nebraska Press

800.755.1105 | www.nebraskapress.unl.edu

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The problem is that for such an accomplished artist, Hague's artwork here is really not very good. It's stiff, the figures often have awkward proportions, and much of it's just plain ugly. When you combine that with the terribly stilted dialogue, you don't end up with a pleasant reading experience. If it weren't for his name on the project, I would have thought this was the work of a first time author/artist, still learning his craft. Strange.

Perhaps it can all be explained by the sticker on the cover that reads: "Soon to be a major motion picture!" Maybe this is just a sketch of the final project, a tease that will look and sound much better in another medium.

The Koontz book — the story is a prequel to the first Odd Thomas novel — has none of those problems. It moves quickly, with plenty of Koontz's humor, and it's fun to visit again with some of the characters who are no longer in the prose book series.

The problem for me is that the art is in the Japanese Manga style. While I don't dislike that style in principle, here I found it too hard to keep track of the characters because they all have a somewhat similar look, especially the male characters. But I'm sure other readers — especially those familiar with this style of art — won't have the same problem. And unlike *In the Small*, the dialogue feels completely natural.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

VISIT OUR WEB SITE

SUBSCRIBE

CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS

COLUMNS

EDITORIALS

DISCUSSION BOARD

WRITERS' GUIDELINES

EXTENSIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANTHOLOGIES

www.fandsf.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

The Resurrectionist, by Jack O'Connell, Algonquin Books, 2008, $24.95.

Other Voices, by Andrew Humphrey, Elastic Press (U.K.), 2008, £5.99.

WE OLD guys, I find, tend to spend a lot of time talking about tradition. Recently Joe Lansdale and I were in Italy together for a week, trodding along down the narrow streets of Piacenza comparing notes on how so many of the early great writers, people like Kornbluth and Kuttner, never got their due. We talked a lot, too, about how science fiction has shaped the way we see the world.

Jack O'Connell's another with a profound respect for older writers, along with an interest in their lives, their work, the wellsprings of their creativity. We're talking insatiable curiosity here, question after question, photocopies of correspondence or of articles from obscure magazines, boxes of musty paperbacks in the attic. What was it like, O'Connell always wants to know, writing pulp, being part of that world — or of the New Wave in the sixties? Want to talk about some fairly obscure writer, say Gil Brewer? Better make a pot of coffee, then, 'cause you'll be there for hours.

O'Connell's first novel, *Box Nine*, centers around a designer drug named Lingo that speeds up language and perception to such full tilt that the world about one begins to dissolve. *Wireless* jump-starts with the murder of an activist priest and gets into gear with renegade federal agents, ballroom-champion midgets, and pirate-like radio jammers whose complex subculture both reflects and ridicules the decayed American dream. Built about a quest for suppressed movie footage, *The Skin Palace* tracks an artist's descent into an underbelly world of half-mad geniuses, new-world

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

messiahs, and blind pornographers. *Word Made Flesh* (reviewed here upon publication) offers up, in the writer's own words, "a grotesque romance about genocide, language, doubt, obsession, worms, epidermis, and sanctuary." See the entire population of Maisel wiped out by a huge tree shredder! See child artists kept in veal pens and forced to produce graphic novels! See the second annual immigrant death match!

And now, fellow travelers, we have *The Resurrectionist*, the latest (five years in the making!) of Jack O'Connell's trademark amalgam of the shabbiest and most puissant elements from science fiction, crime novels, westerns, horror tales, thrillers. The setting, again, is Quinsigamond, a city constructed of the world's crawlspaces and alleyways and populated by humankind's leftovers.

American genre fiction, American fiction as a whole, in fact, has more in common with the romance than with the novel proper, the latter concerned with the individual in society, the former more often with the individual set against society. And because of this, even in conservative writers, even with the machineries of genre expression grinding predictably away, quite often something wild, something nihilistic and untamable, keeps breaking onto the page. It is this that Jack O'Connell so treasures, I think, in his admiration of pulp and early genre writers. And it is certainly what he's forever reaching for in his own work.

In *The Skin Palace*, filmmaker Hugo Schick wants "the very synapses of the human brain to be accessible as my own editing board, the ultimate Moviola.... More images, faster images, all the time,... And, finally, I want a way of editing any and all of this goulash together — life image, dream image, movie image...."

Which sounds a lot like O'Connell's working method.

In *The Resurrectionist* we begin reading the story of a child in a coma and the pharmacist father who has taken a job with the progressive, if unorthodox, clinic that will be assuming his son's care. It's a spooky enough place, and the father's initial encounters with staff are, well, a bit off.

That's chapter one. Then suddenly in chapter two we've fallen through cracks into the tale of a troop of circus freaks.

"They came from the city of Maisel in the heart of Old Bohemia, land of pogroms and demonology. They became a family in the most

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

binding way of all, through a shared and pitiless suffering. [...] What does it mean to be a freak? For the Goldfaden Freaks it meant, for a time, a brief period in the beginning, that they were stars."

Soon thereafter comes a character named Spider and — ready for it? — the biker gang to which he belongs.

"Run by Buzz Cote, a burly veteran of the crank wars, the Abominations were classic renegades. Unaffiliated and proud of it, they swooped into towns like a plague, announcing their presence but never their agenda. Coming to Quinsigamond out of Phoenix, they found their way to the Harmony as if it were the ancestral home. [...] With any luck they'd be pulling out of the city in another week or two but Buzz knew, from experience, you don't rely on luck."

So he's about to send the boys out on a little joyride.

People in comas, families at ragged ends. A scientist with unbridled ambition. Dark, forbidding clinic. Fatos the mule-faced boy, Aziz the human torso, Nadja the lobster girl, Durga the fat lady, Jeta the skeleton, Milena the hermaphrodite, Antoinette the pinhead, Marcel and Vasco the Siamese twins, Kitty the dwarf, and Chick the chicken boy all wandering about doing their best to survive in whatever world it is that they inhabit. And a gang of bikers with mysterious agendas led by Buzz and — as in time we discover — a nurse who works at the clinic.

All this, yet we never get more than a step or two away from the heart of the story, which is about a father's loss and knowingly hopeless love for the son who once loved to read the Limbo Comics from which the tale of the freaks is taken.

The Resurrectionist is a brilliant, wild, heartfelt novel. It seems, like all of O'Connell's work, at once to bear tribute to its predecessors and to come out of nowhere, a stew whose various lumps, gristles, fillers, and spices have long since cooked down to a single, amazing richness.

O'Connell's books are one of a kind — again and again. From its very inception science fiction has been blessed with an extraordinary wealth of great original talents. Jack O'Connell is, with Tim Powers, Gene Wolfe, and a handful of others working today, securely among them.

Dreams, great novels, dialogue with those we love, the way we live our lives: it's all about stories.

And I find myself remembering

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

those conversations with Joe, how science fiction has framed the way we think, the very way we see our world.

As mentioned in my last column, this magazine in the fifties became a vanguard for the blending of the details of mundane, everyday life with fantasy. When Jack O'Connell works to make his fantasy worlds more real than the one encompassing you as you read, he honors and extends that tradition.

Andrew Humphrey does something similar. Several of the thirteen stories in *Other Voices* are not science fiction, others have minor though seminal arealist elements, but all are informed, as are Joe's and mine, by a particular bend in the light, by a sense of estrangement — of looking on from afar — that seems basically a science-fictional perspective.

Here is a man whose wild talent is taking away grief, and who coldly goes about making a living from it:

"Then she became soft, pliant, folded against him. And he felt the usual slow warmth and tasted something dark and bitter at the back of his throat. She murmured, 'My God, my God,' into his chest and he held her, stroked the top of her head, and felt something tender, something close to love. Even though he charged for this and although he didn't actually give a shit, Carter was suddenly imbued with a tainted, accidental sense of virtue."

He stands there, a hundred and fifty euros richer, tainted with virtue, amidst a city in chaos, in a future U.K. come apart at every seam and perhaps all the more affecting for its being so sparely adumbrated.

In stories with little or no fantastic element, much the same sensibility manifests. Troughton in the title story can feel time distort and fold in on itself, catching him in its creases. So haunted is he by his alcoholic father that, though a professed non-drinker, he stinks of booze and by midmorning runs with sweat, "swollen, amber colored drops, they'd ooze between the hairs of his arms and smell and taste of whiskey." Like many of Humphrey's characters, he is in a dissolved or dissolving relationship that seems to be cascading out to take down the whole of his world with it.

In this and in other stories we can never quite discern (as the characters cannot) what is real, what imagined. In "Dogfight," Spitfires and Messerschmitts hammer at one another above the heads of an estranged father and son, mirroring dogfights in which the father's abusive grandfather may have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

participated, or which he may have made up. Are the planes real? Imagined?

"The howl of the engine became a scream. The horizon was all Messerschmitt. When it was almost on us I said, 'It can't hurt us, Danny.'

"He moved closer still. Flank to flank, we faced it together."

In "Three Days" an abducted girl returns home. The parents have no notion where she has been. Has she in fact returned? Has she undergone some mysterious transformation? Or has she, or her memory, somehow become for them an avatar of things *not* changing?

"Ginny feels warm and smells of vanilla. She always smells of vanilla. Her weight always feels exactly the same on my lap, too, has for months and months. I squeeze her waist and she turns towards me. I do the usual check: hair, teeth, nails. None have grown since the day she disappeared. Which is odd, I suppose, but Beth and I don't mention it."

Then, just when you think you may be on firm realist ground, or at least have the shore firmly in sight, Humphrey throws a curveball like "Mimic," a perfect little science fiction fable playing off the changes of such as Budrys's *Who*? and Campbell's "Who Goes There?"

"The man who could be my identical twin sits on the edge of a metal-framed bed in an isolation cell that's deep in the recesses of a secret bunker, which itself is buried beneath an abandoned Second World War airfield, somewhere in Norfolk."

My personal favorite here has to be "Think of a Number," a nice little tale of the child whose father pimped him out to pedophiles then dumped him when he became too old, and of the recovering pedophile, an assassin, who takes him on as ward and apprentice. This is a story that, even on fourth reading, I find at once profoundly disturbing yet reassuring, a story for which my admiration is boundless: its quiet refusal to be, from line to line and sentence to sentence, what we expect; the uneasiness it creates without bending towards the sensational or sentimental; our unwitting identification with the characters; the story's restraint and many silences; the simple *reach* of it.

Humphrey has published a previous collection, *Open the Box*, and, more or less simultaneously with *Other Voices*, a novel, *Allison*. Neither of these, like *Other Voices*, appears to have been published or to be easily available in the U.S. Both will shortly be here on my shelves.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Around these parts, Gene Mirabelli is known for his literary stories about the history of science, including "The Only Known Jump Across Time" (Sept. 2003) and "The Woman in Schrödinger's Wave Equations" (Aug. 2005). His most recent book, The Goddess in Love with a Horse (and What Happened Next), *incorporates "Only Known Jump" in it. You can find that story reprinted on our Website this month.*

His new story for us is something of a departure — it's just as good, but be warned: this one probably isn't appropriate to share with younger readers.

Falling Angel

By Eugene Mirabelli

THIS HAPPENED IN AUGUST, 1967, an August so hot that asphalt melted in the streets and seven of the trees along the river burst into flame. The air was boiling in his apartment, so Brendan had propped open the skylight and was lying naked on his back on the bare floor, one hand under his head and the other on his sweaty privates, ashamed of himself because he had jerked off a while ago and felt like doing it again. He was staring up at the square of blue sky as if from the bottom of the sea when a body as naked as his own floated ten feet above the skylight, thrashing and clawing and choking — then it stopped thrashing and sank very gently headfirst with the legs floating out behind, a swimmer whose lungs had filled with water, and came to rest with a white cheek flat against the skylight, the mouth wide open and the eyes like blue quartz. Brendan lay there trying to puzzle out what had happened. Abruptly he pulled up a chair and stood on it, reached out through the open skylight to grapple a leg and hauled the body down feetfirst into his arms, himself crashing sideways onto the floor under the sudden weight. He got up and — What can I say? This was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a bare-assed young woman, maybe eighteen years old, with a wingspread of over twelve feet.

A bitter stink of burnt feathers hung in the air and, in fact, Brendan noticed that the trailing vanes on both wings were singed away, revealing a sooty membrane underneath, and her right arm was seared. He rolled her onto her back. Her wide eyes were as sightless as two pieces of turquoise, as if she had drowned in air. He was wondering was she drunk or stoned or in a narcoleptic fit when she stumbled to her feet, knocking him aside. She glared at the skylight and began to howl — a freezing sound that started as a single icy note, solitary at first but soon joined by others all pitched the same and all in different timbres until it seemed a whole orchestra was shivering the room, cracking the windows, exploding bottles, glasses, light bulbs. Brendan had clamped his hands over his ears, had run as far as he could and continued to bang his head against the wall until the desolate cry ended. "Who are you?" he asked, gasping for breath.

She turned her stone eyes toward him and spoke, or tried to, but all that came out was a kind of mangled music.

"Stop!" he cried, ducking his head and clapping his hands to his ears again. "Stop!"

But she went on until there was nothing but shards of sound, then she shrugged and said something like *Oh, shit*, tripped over the mattress on the floor and plunged into a deep sleep. Brendan wiped the sweat from his eyes and watched to see if she would stir, then he righted the chair under the skylight, stood on it and pulled himself shakily onto the roof with the hope of spying some explanation. There was only the commonplace desert of tar and gravel. He dropped back into his room, chained the door and wedged the chair under the doorknob. He was trembling from exhaustion when he returned to look at her — one long white wing lay folded across her rump and the other spread open like a busted fan across the mattress and onto the floor. He crept slowly from one side of the mattress to the other and watched the light shimmer this way and that on the feathers as he moved, feeling ashamed of himself when he paused at the glimpse of gold hairs at her crotch. He had always understood that there was no difference of sex between angels, that angels were not male or female but pure spirits. Now he didn't know what to think, much less what to do, and it got to be so quiet you could hear the faucet drip. So Brendan retrieved

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his little tin box of joints from the window ledge and sat on the floor with his back to the wall, struck a match and began to smoke, keeping his dazed eyes on her all the while.

She slept for two days and two nights, or maybe it was three days and nights, or maybe only that one day and night — Brendan lost track because he fell asleep himself. When he woke up she was sitting cross-legged on the mattress, looking at him with eyes as clear as a summer sky. "You need a shave," she told him, for her voice had cleared, too.

"I've been busy," he said, startled.

She was looking around at the bare white walls and scuffed wood floor, at the banged-up guitar case and the old record player and the short row of records and books on the floor against the wall. "Yeah? Doing what?" she asked, skeptically.

"Thinking about things, meditating." He had gotten to his feet and had begun to search hurriedly for his underwear or his pants or any scrap of cloth to hide himself.

"You ought to eat more. You look like a fucking bird cage on stilts. What's your name?"

"Brendan Flood," he said. He hadn't found his underwear but quickly thrust a leg into his blue jeans anyway. "I've been on a fast. I've been meditating and fasting," he explained. "Who — "

"Meditating and fasting? Holy shit!" She laughed. "Who pays the rent here?"

"Me. I work nights as a programmer. Listen — " he began.

"So what else have you been doing? Hash? Acid? Come on, Brendan. Don't look so surprised. I know you've been smoking grass. The air is full of it."

"Listen, who are you?"

"I'm an escapee, Brendan. Just like you. You can trust me. Jill," she added as an afterthought.

"That's your name?"

"They named me Morning Glory," she said sarcastically. "But you can call me Jill, yes."

"How did you get here?"

"Well, you've got a chair jammed against the door, Brendan. And I didn't scale the walls. I came in over the roof. Remember?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He groaned and rubbed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes. "What day is today?" he asked, not opening his eyes.

"How would I know?"

He looked at those wings that stood like snowdrifts behind her shoulders. "Do those come off?" he asked.

"Are you being funny? This is me," she said, glancing down at her breasts, cupping and lifting them. "As fucking naked as I get."

Her flesh was the color of the dawn horizon, so beautiful it frightened him, but he gathered his courage and looked at her — her face, the hollow of her throat, her breasts and the honey-colored hair of her crotch. Yet at the first surge of desire he felt a chilly counter current, a fear that his lust was a monstrous sacrilege that would bring the wrath of God down on his head like a hammer. He escaped to the bathroom to piss and discovered a long gold hair stuck to the damp wall tile. He filled the washbowl with cold water and doused his privates, thinking to put out the fire and clean himself at the same time, but it was his brain that was ablaze and just when he was dunking his head it came to him that the creature in the next room might not be an angel at all, might be some delusion fabricated by Satan, whereupon his legs gave way and he pitched forward into the faucet and came up choking. He wondered if he were going crazy.

He went back to the room and found her seated cross-legged on the mattress reading one of his books, *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, which was where he kept his cigarette papers. She looked up and began reciting, "And when the stars threw down their spears and water'd heaven with their tears — " but saw that Brendan was already aroused, up and rising. "Ah, you devil," she murmured, tossing aside the book to grasp his shaft. "Did he who made the lamb make thee?"

Brendan was doomed to remember their lovemaking for the rest of his life. It began simply enough when he threw himself to the mattress and pulled her onto her back, hoping to get a hand on her breast and a knee between her thighs, but before he could make his next move he felt her fingernails pierce his rump and felt his cock being seized as in an oiled fist and he slid in deeper and higher until he couldn't tell whether he was fainting or screaming with pleasure. He had staggered to his feet and was carrying her upright, her legs around him like a vise, stumbling now against the chair and then the table and now crashing against the wall and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again the table, carrying her at last as if she were miraculously weightless or as if she were actually carrying him, as if he were on his back, hooped in her arms and legs, her wings beating slowly but just enough to keep them afloat above the mattress and table and chairs. And when he came it was a long, long rush in which his body gave itself completely away, such a long rush that he could feel the marrow being drawn sweetly through his spine from his distant fingers and toes, and at the end of it every one of his bones was hollow and his skull completely empty.

Later they lay side by side on the sweat-soaked mattress and Brendan, believing he had been turned inside out and the secret lining of his life exposed, told her all about his student days at Cal Tech where he learned Fortran and Cobol and other machine languages of lethal boredom, followed by his years on the road as a Zen guitarist with Zodiac which had nearly driven him crazy, and how for these past three months he had fasted and prayed, waiting for God to give him a message or vision or signal of some sort. When he was finished he looked at Jill and she said, "I'm hungry. Are you hungry? I know I am. I'm starved."

Of course, there was no food in the place. So Brendan pulled on his clothes and hunted up a pair of jeans and a T-shirt for Jill, but she refused to wear them because, she explained, she couldn't go out. "Going out gives me an anxiety attack," she said. "I get panicky and throw up or pee in my pants if I go out." So Brendan went out and came back with three hamburgers and some sliced pickles. He sat across from her at his wobbly table, bit into his hamburger, looked at her shining breasts and watched her eat. She tore through her food — "Are you going to finish that?" she asked him, glancing at his plate — and when she had downed the last half of his hamburger she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and said she wanted to go up on the roof to take a look around. He asked her didn't she want to wear something, anything, to cover up, and so on. "For Christ sake, Brendan, this is 1967! The last dress I owned was made of colored paper." But she pulled on a pair of his shorts and Brendan set his chair under the skylight, gave her a boost, and pulled himself up behind her.

Remember, this was Boston's Back Bay where the roofs are flat and the brownstones are built shoulder to shoulder with no space between them, so you can walk from roof to roof to roof for a quarter of a mile before coming to a cross street. Brendan watched her looking around and realized

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she might have come from just a few roofs away and nowhere more exotic. She had shaded her eyes with her hand and was gazing across the pipe vents, TV aerials, skylights, and chimneys to the soft horizon. "What city is this?" she asked him.

"What do you mean, what city! This is Boston! Don't you even know what city you're in?"

She whirled on him, saying, "You're so smart and you don't even know what day it is! I never said I was smart. I never went to college. So fuck off!"

Brendan flushed. "It's the twelfth. Or the thirteenth. I stayed up all night to watch the meteor shower on the eleventh. So it must be Saturday. I think."

"What difference does it make what city it is, anyway?" she muttered, sullen.

So they dropped back into Brendan's place where he stepped out of his blue jeans and she peeled off her shorts and they knelt face to face on the mattress and began to make love again, and it would have been even better than before except that Brendan had begun to doubt that anything could be so good or that he could be so fortunate or that Jill (or Morning Glory or whatever her name was) could be what she appeared to be.

Three nights a week Brendan crossed the river to Cambridge where he worked as a computer programmer, but other than that, these two slept at night and made love by day, all day, every day. They ate, of course. Jill still refused to go down to the street, saying she had a bad case of agoraphobia and dreaded open space, so Brendan went off for groceries and came back with take-out hamburgers and pizzas and Chinese, plus pasta to cook up right there. Brendan never gained a pound; in fact, he lost a few. "Are you trying to starve yourself to death?" Jill asked him.

"Food dirties the windows of perception," he told her.

"Because, do you know what they do to people who try to kill themselves but fuck up and don't do it right? They strap them down and do things to make them regret their mistakes. Believe me," she said.

When he asked her how come she knew about such things she said, "I'm an escapee. Remember?" which was what she usually said whenever he asked her about herself.

But mostly they made love. There were days when they clowned

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around, as when they lathered themselves in whipped cream and licked it from each other's flesh, and hours of heavy sensuality when he lingered and she opened to him with the languor of a flower and, to be sure, there were moments when he rushed her like the whippet that he was.

Her feathers had begun to show color and in November she announced that she was pregnant. Now Brendan noticed that whenever they made love the points at the trailing edge of her wings glowed translucent pink and each successive time they joined the color reached deeper into the feathers, like dye soaking into fabric, until the wings themselves took on a pale rose cast, a shade which deepened each day and, in fact, the hue at the tip of each feather began to alter from red to maculate gold in the way of a spotted trout, and from that to a grassy emerald to an iridescent sapphire such as you see in peacock feathers, thence to a purple so luminous it tinted the room. Her eyes changed, too. Some days they were so clear that when he looked into them he saw sky, clouds, stars, albino doves. Other days they solidified into black mirrors and she would turn her blind face to the skylight and scream, then hurtle from one end of the room to the other, dashing herself ruthlessly against the walls until she dropped, the pulse beating furiously in her neck, her soundless mouth stretched open and her wide eyes like agates. When she'd come to, she'd shiver in his arms and though her teeth were chattering she'd grin and say something like, "I graduated from Boston Psychopathic with a degree in paranoia. What do you think? Am I a fallen angel or what?" He would pull her across his lap and hold her head to his shallow chest, rocking her until she drifted to a peaceful slumber, his brain spinning in confusion.

Brendan had never wanted a telephone in his place and now he couldn't afford one, so he called from a public booth at the nearby health-food store, searching for a gynecologist or obstetrician or plain medical doctor who would make a house visit, but of course there wasn't one to be found. He did come across a midwife's card on the bulletin board there, so he phoned her and, since she lived only a few blocks away, she said she'd come around to examine Jill the next day. But the next day when Jill found out who was at the door she barricaded herself in the bathroom and refused to come out till the midwife had gone. Jill informed Brendan that she didn't need a doctor or midwife. "What do they know? We can do this ourselves. You're smart. There are books on this," she said. He broke into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a sweat, but bit his tongue so as to say nothing and went out and came back with five books on childbirth.

"No. Not these," she told him, exasperated. "There's this French doctor who helps women give birth under water. Get the one by him."

"You'll drown!" Brendan cried, remembering her face as he had first seen it pressed against the skylight almost twelve months ago.

"Not the woman, asshole! The baby. The baby gets born under water in a tub. Get that one."

He didn't go looking for the book but it wouldn't have made any difference if he had, because several years were to go by before women gave birth in tubs of warm water at Dr. Odent's clinic in Pithivier, France. When Brendan awoke on August 11th, Jill was flat on her back in labor beside him, her fingers deep in the mattress ticking, her hair stuck like gold leaf on her damp forehead and cheeks. He pulled on his jeans and jammed his feet into his sneakers and stumbled down the stairway, his loose laces whipping and snapping at each step, and ran to the health-food store where he phoned the midwife. Seven minutes later the midwife's car turned onto Brendan's street and began to nose hesitantly along the row of parked cars, looking for a place to stop, but Brendan pulled her from the wheel and hustled her up the stairway and into his flat. As the midwife later testified, Jill was seated naked on the wood chair under the skylight, the baby wrapped in a bloody dish towel on her lap. "Don't come any closer!" she cried, jumping up. She scrambled awkwardly onto the chair seat and stood wavering there as if under the endless impact of a waterfall, the swaddled infant now crying in her arms. "Brendan, take the baby. It's a girl, like me. — You stay back, lady!" she shouted at the midwife. Brendan received the baby from her. "We crazies are the only true rebels against God," she said, reaching toward the open rim of the skylight. Then this Jill, or Morning Glory or whatever her name was, pulled herself out to the roof and jumped off, finishing her long dive from the battlements of heaven.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Our membership in the Reed-of-the-Month Club has served us well this year (as you can see if you check our annual index in this issue). This month's offering is a science fiction story that shows off many of the things that Robert Reed does well.

Leave

By Robert Reed

POLITICS DOESN'T MAKE friendships. I have forgotten the names and faces of almost every other protester, and that's after two years of enduring the elements with those very good people, berating distant politicians as well as the occasional drivers who showed us their middle fingers.

No, what makes the friendship is when two adult men discover a common, powerful love for skiing and for chess.

I met Don in front of the old Federal Building. We had found ourselves defending the same street corner, holding high a pair of hand-painted signs demanding that our troops come home. That was seventeen years ago. Our cause was just, and I never doubted the wisdom or glorious nobility of our methods. But every memory is tinged with guilty nostalgia. Of course the war was wrong — a blatant, foolish mistake perpetrated by stupid and criminally arrogant leaders — and hasn't history proved us right? If only more people had stood on enough corners, and then our not-so-good nation would have emerged sooner from that disaster with our

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reputation only slightly mangled and thousands of our precious young people saved.

Don was the most ordinary member of our tofu-loving group. With his conservative clothes, the constant shave, and his closely cropped, prematurely gray hair, he was our respectable citizen in a platoon composed of cranks and ideologues. There was some half-serious speculation that poor Don was an agent for the State Patrol or FBI. But beneath that respectable, boring exterior lurked a card-carrying member of the Libertarian Party. Chat with the man for five minutes, and you knew he was genuine. Listen to a thirty-minute lecture, and you'd take away everything you'd ever need to know about personal responsibility and stripping the government from our private lives.

The fact that our spouses hit it off instantly didn't hurt either. Our wives ended up being as good friends as we were. So it seems that war gave me one good gift: Don and Amanda, and their two children, Morgan and sweet Little Donnie.

Cheryl and I couldn't have kids — a constant sadness in an otherwise untroubled marriage. So when I mention being close to Don's children, picture a fond uncle.

Morgan was ten when we met the family — a bright, almost pretty girl who would make any parent proud. She had inherited her father's fastidious attitude and a sharp, organized mind. Being seven years older than her brother, she helped raise the wild youngster. Yet the girl never complained, even if that meant babysitting a weepy, feverish imp while her folks stood in the sleet and wind, holding high signs begging the world for a single rational act.

I can't remember Morgan ever acting jealous toward her sibling. Which was a considerable feat, if you knew Little Donnie and his special relationship to the world.

As a toddler, LD (as his family called him) was an effervescent presence already speaking in long, lucid sentences. Cheryl explained to me that some three-year-old girls managed that early verbal capacity, but never little boys. Then she pointed out — and not for the last time — that Little Donnie wasn't merely smart, he was absolutely beautiful: a delicious sweet prince of a lad destined to grow up into a gorgeous young man.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Don was openly proud of both kids, but LD stories outnumbered Morgan stories at least three-to-one.

Every time I saw my friend, he had to share at least one LD anecdote. Preschool and then elementary school brought a string of thunderous successes, including perfect report cards and glowing praise from every teacher. And middle school — that realm of social carnivores and petty hatreds — proved to be a tiny challenge for the golden boy. Of course LD earned his place in the finest gifted programs in the state. And it didn't hurt that he was a major force in the local T-ball circuit, and that he dominated the seventh-grade basketball court, and nobody in eighth grade could hang with that stallion when he decided to run the four hundred meter sprint.

But eighth grade was when our world abruptly and unexpectedly changed.

As the boy entered high school, the glowing reports fell off. Don was still genuinely thrilled with his son. I have no doubts. But suddenly he was less likely to share his news about LD's continuing rise to still-undefined greatness.

What if somebody was listening to his boasts?

Distant but horrible forces were at work in the universe, and Don sensed that silence might be the wiser course.

In an earlier age, Don and I had done what we could to battle an awful war. Success meant that our troops eventually came home, and his children could grow up safe, and nothing else seemed to matter.

But LD turned fourteen, and a new war began.

Or rather, an unimaginably old and bizarre and utterly unexpected conflict had found its way into our lives and tidy homes.

I was still kept abreast about the most important LD news. And I'd cross paths with the boy, or my wife would. As she had predicted, he grew up gorgeous and brilliant. And Little Donnie remained charming, though in that cool, detached way that every generation invents for the first time. He was always polite to us, even at the end. His lies were small affairs, and on the surface, harmless. It actually made me jealous to hear my middle-aged bride praising the Apollo-like figure who had chatted with her at the supermarket. But she was right. "The only thing I worry about," she said with a confidential tone, "is that LD has too many choices. Know what I mean, John?"

I suppose I did, but not from my own life experience.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There's so many careers he could conquer," Cheryl added. "And with any girl he wants, of course."

Including my wife, if she could have just shrugged off twenty years and forty pounds.

"Is he doing all right at school?" she would ask.

As far as I knew, yes.

"Because Amanda's mentioned that his grades are down," she reported. "And his folks are getting worried about his friends."

Big Don had never quite mentioned those concerns, I noted.

Then a few months later, my best friend dropped his king on its side and told me, "I resign." That very poor performance on the chessboard preceded a long, painful silence. Then with a distracted air, he added, "LD's been suspended."

Did I hear that right? "Suspended from what?"

"School," Don allowed.

I didn't know what to say, except, "Sorry."

Don looked tired. He nodded, and after hard consideration decided to smile. "But he's in a twelve-step program. For the drug use."

I was astonished. "What drug use?"

He didn't seem to hear me. With a wince, he reported, "The counselors are telling us that when a kid is high-functioning, being bored is the greatest danger."

We were talking about drugs, and we weren't.

"What drugs?" I had to ask.

"It doesn't matter." Don paused, then nodded, as though he'd convinced himself it really didn't matter.

I slumped back in my chair, staring at the remaining black and blond chessmen.

"LD is in rehab," the worried father continued, "and he's promised to get clean and well. And he'll graduate on time, too."

A string of promises that were met, it turned out.

That next year, the young prince went to our local college — perhaps to keep him within reach of his worried parents. What news I heard was cautiously favorable. But after the first semester, even those mild boasts stopped coming. The only glowing news was about Morgan and her burgeoning career as a dermatologist.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I made a few tactful inquiries.

Don would say, "Oh, the boy's doing fine too."

Cheryl's queries to Amanda ended with the same evasive non-answers.

Then one morning, while strolling downtown on some errand, I happened to stumble across the famous LD.

To my eye, he looked fit and sober.

But when he told me, "I'm going to buy a new bike today," he was lying. And when he said, "I'm riding across the country this summer," he was feeding me a fairy tale.

The boy had already made up his mind.

I didn't even suspect it.

"Enjoy your ride," I advised, feeling proud of this tall, strong kid with whom I had shared nothing except seventeen years and an emotional stake that was never defined, but nonetheless felt huge.

"See you, Mr. Vance."

"Take care, LD."

Two weeks later, Don called me at work. "Have you seen my boy?" he asked. Then before I could answer, he blurted, "In the last five days, I mean."

"I haven't," I allowed. My stomach clenched tight. "Why?"

"LD's vanished."

Some intuition kept me from mentioning the bike ride.

"We just found out," said a terrified parent. "Donnie's failed all of his classes, and nobody seems to know where he is."

I had nothing worth saying.

And then with a tight, sorry voice, Don confessed, "I just hope it's the meth again. You know? Something small and fixable like that."

FIVE YEARS EARLIER, our tiny world had changed. But it wasn't a historic event that happened in a single day or during a tumultuous month. In fact most of humanity did its stubborn best to ignore the subject. So what if a few voices told the same incredible story? And what if astronomers and their big telescopes couldn't entirely discount their crazy words? In our United States, the average God-fearing citizen still didn't swallow

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the idea of natural selection, and that's after almost two centuries of compelling research. Rational minds had to be skeptical. Even after the story broke, there were long stretches when I considered the whole business to be an elaborate, ludicrous joke. But the evidence did grow with time, and I had no choice but to become a grudging believer. And then our friends' son vanished without warning, and Cheryl turned to me in bed and asked when I thought LD would actually leave the Earth behind.

My response was less than dignified.

Thoroughly and passionately pissed, I told my wife, "He bought a bike, and he went wandering."

"And you know this how?"

"That's what he told me he was doing," I reminded her.

"And has anybody seen this bike?"

I didn't respond.

"His parents talked to everybody," she continued. "Girlfriends, his buddies. Professors and both roommates. They never saw a bike. Or a packed suitcase. Or anything you'd take on a trip."

"I know that."

"With the clothes on his back, he went out on a midnight walk," she continued. "His car was still parked in the street. Nobody remembers him buying a bike or camping gear or anything else you'd want on a cross country ride."

"Don told me all that, honey."

"Did Don mention his son's checking account?"

I said nothing.

And she read my expression. For an instant, she took a spouse's cruel pleasure in having the upper hand. "LD drained it and closed it."

"Why not? A kid on the road needs money."

"Amanda just told me. LD left all that cash in an envelope addressed to them. They found it while searching his room. Eleven hundred dollars, plus a birthday check from Grandma that he never bothered to endorse."

Bike ride or drug binge. In neither case would the boy leave that tidy sum behind.

Once again, Cheryl asked, "How soon does he leave the Earth?"

In the pettiest possible ways, I was hurt that Don hadn't mentioned finding the money.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What's Amanda think?" I asked.

"The worst," said Cheryl.

"Did they call the police?"

"Last night. From LD's apartment."

I had to ask, "But do the cops care? This is not a child anymore. We're talking about a legal, voting-age adult."

"An adult who has vanished."

But citizens had rights, including the freedom to fail at college, and then out of embarrassment or shame, dive out of sight.

I asked, "Have the police met with them?"

Cheryl dipped her head sadly. "Amanda didn't say," she admitted. "She started to cry again, said it was too painful, and hung up."

"I believe that," I muttered.

"Talk to Don," she advised.

I nodded, wringing a sad joy out of the moment, allowing myself to revel in the awful fact that I didn't have any children of my own to worry about.

"On average," Don asked, "how many young men and women vanish? In a given year."

I offered an impressive number.

"Multiply that by three," he warned.

"Is that the U.S., or everywhere?"

"Just the U.S."

"I see."

We'd met at the coffee house for our traditional chess game. The board was set up, but neither of us had the strength to push a pawn. My good friend — a creature who could not go into a new day without clean clothes and a scrubbed face — looked awful. A scruffy beard was coming in white. The eyes were rimmed with blood, and I could see dirt under his fingernails. Where had the man been digging, and why? But I didn't ask, watching him pick up his mug of free-trade coffee and sip it and look into the swirling blackness. Then a voice almost too soft to be heard asked, "How many go up there? Out of a thousand missing people, how many?"

"Twenty," I guessed.

"Not bad. It's ten and a half."

"How do we know that?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There's Websites," he explained. "Help societies and half a dozen federal agencies like to keep databases, and the answers mostly agree with each other. Most missing people are found sooner or later, and there's some who drop off remote cliffs, and there's always drug users who aren't found and murder victims too."

My black pieces waited at attention, fearless and wood-hearted.

"Go into space or become a murder victim: Those are about equally likely, as it happens." In a peculiar way, the haggard face betrayed hope. Then with the earnest tone of confession, Don mentioned, "That's what I want the cops to believe. That LD's been killed."

"So they look for him?"

"Sure."

I sipped my warm coffee, weighing the probabilities.

"Of course they don't believe me," he continued. "But if his disappearance isn't a crime, then they can't do anything beyond filling out a missing-person's report."

I kept thinking about tall and handsome LD, calmly lying to me about the bike and his plans for the summer. The prick.

"He's alive," I said, aiming for hope.

Don remained silent, fearful.

"Okay," I allowed. "Suppose he's joined up with *them*."

I was passing into an uncomfortable terrain. Don leaned back and dropped his shoulders, and with a whisper, he said, "Okay."

"They don't take their recruits off the Earth right away," I pointed out. "I mean, *they* might be wizards with space flight and all. But their volunteers have to be trained first, to make sure that they can...you know...do their job well enough to make them worth the trouble."

"Sure."

"Lifting a big young man past Pluto," I said. "It costs energy."

"It does," he agreed.

"LD is smart," I continued. "And sure, he has a bunch of talents. But do you really think, Don — in your heart of hearts, I mean — do you believe that your son is capable of serving as a soldier in some miserable alien war...?"

There was a long, uncomfortable pause.

Then the shaggy white face lifted, and just by looking at the sleepless eyes, I could tell we were talking about two different boys.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Little Donnie," his father muttered.

With all the confidence and horror he could muster, Don declared, "My son would make a marvelous, perfect soldier."

NOBODY KNOWS when the war began, and no sane human mind claims to understand the whys and for-whats that keep it alive today.

But we know for sure that the first human recruits vanished four decades ago. My father's generation supplied that early fodder, though the world didn't notice when a few thousand boys failed to come downstairs for breakfast. By unknown means, the Kuipers identified the ripest targets among us — always male, always smart and adaptable — and through elaborate and almost invisible negotiations, they would winnow the field to the best of the best. Usually the boy's mind would wander, experiencing a series of lucid daydreams. About fighting, of course. But more important, the aliens would test his capacity to cooperate and coldly reason and make rapid-fire decisions under stress. And they always made sure that he would say, "Yes," before the question was asked. "Yes" meant that a young human was agreeing to serve one Nest for ten full seasons — a little more than three decades, Earth-time. Survive that maelstrom of carnage, and you were honored and subsequently released from service. Then according to traditions older than our innocent species, you were allowed to bring home one small sack stuffed full of loot.

Ten years ago, a few middle-aged gentlemen reappeared suddenly. There was some interest, but not much belief: They came from the Third World, and how credible is a Bangladeshi fisherman or a Nigerian farmer? But then six years ago a Frenchman returned to his home village, and he made the right kinds of noise for the cameras. Then came a Canadian gent, and an Italian, and then a pair of handsome American brothers who suddenly strolled into a town square in New Hampshire. In the media's eyes, these weren't just crazy peasants rambling on about impossible things. Here stood men with good educations and remembered faces and what soon became very public stories, and if their families gave up on them ages ago, at least there were siblings and elderly parents who could say with confidence, "It is him. It is them. I know it is. Yes."

And they brought home their sacks of loot, too.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Some of those possessions had obvious value — gemstones of extraordinary purity, slabs of rare-earth elements, and other materials that would have carried a healthy price on the open market. But the biggest noise came from what looked like trash: Pieces of pretty rock, shards of irradiated glass, unfathomable chunks of burnt machinery, and in a few cases, vials of dirty water.

Each veteran looked older than his years, with haunted, spent eyes and flesh that had been abused by extreme temperatures and cosmic rays. Some had lost fingers, some entire limbs. Each wore scars, outside and in. But despite very different origins and unrelated languages, they told identical stories: About being recruited by creatures dubbed the Kuipers who taught them how to fight, and despite very long odds, how to survive.

The Kuipers were a deeply social organism, it was explained.

But not like bees or termites or even naked mole rats. There were no queens or castes. In their youth, every alien had a strong, vaguely humanoid body capable of modest shape-shifting. But as adults they had to find a worthy patch of ground to set down roots, interlocking with one another, forming elaborate beds that were at least as intricate and beautiful as coral reefs.

The Kuipers didn't refer to themselves by that name. Their original world circled some distant sun; nobody knew for sure which one. They were an ancient species that had wandered extensively, creating a scattering of colonies. For the last thousand millennia, a substantial population of Kuipers had been fighting each other for possession of a single planet-sized comet that was drifting somewhere "out there."

No veteran could point at the sky and say, "This is where you look."

Navigating in deep space wasn't an essential skill, it seemed.

When the story broke, good scientific minds loudly doubted that any world matched the vivid descriptions given to family members and the media. Comets were tiny things; even Pluto and its sisters didn't possess the gravity or far horizons that were being described. And they were far too cold and airless for humans wearing nothing but self-heating armor. But then one astronomer happened to look in the proper direction with a telescope just sensitive enough, and there it was: A giant ice-clad world moving high above the solar system's waist, carrying enough mass to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

build a second Earth, but built of less substantial ingredients like water and hydrocarbons laid over a small core of sulfurous iron.

That new world's crust, though frozen, was no colder than a bad winter day in Antarctica. A multitude of subsurface fusion reactors created a deep, warm, and very busy ocean. Ice volcanoes and long fissures let the excess heat escape upward. As promised, the atmosphere was dense and remarkable — a thick envelope of free oxygen and nitrogen laced with odd carbon molecules and rare isotopes, plus a host of other telltale signs proving the existence of some kind of robust, highly technological life.

Moving at light-speed, more than a day was required to reach that distant battlefield.

Human soldiers were moved at a more prosaic rate, several weeks invested in the outbound voyage. Which was still immensely quick, by human standards. The Kuipers' ships were tiny and black, invisible to our radar and nearly unnoticeable to the human eye. They never carried weapons. Every veteran made that blanket assurance. By law or convention, spaceships were forbidden to fight, much less attack any other species. And without exception, the surrounding universe was neutral — a taboo of peace balanced by the endless war on their world.

A curious mind could ask, "Which side did you fight for?"

Those retired soldiers always had a name for their sponsoring nest or reef, and rarely did two soldiers use the same name.

"How many reefs are there?" people inquired.

"Two hundred and eleven," was the unvarying answer.

Hearing that, a human being would invest the distant struggle with some familiar politics.

"So how does this play out?" they would ask. "One hundred reefs fighting the other hundred, with a few neutral cowards sitting on the sidelines?"

Some veterans laughed off those simple, wrong-headed questions. But more often they would put on expressions of disgust, even rage. Then with a single passionate breath, they would explain that there was no such thing as neutrality or alliances, or cowardice for that matter, and each reef gladly battled every one of its neighbors, plus any other force that stupidly drifted into the field of fire.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

War was the Kuipers' natural state, and that's the way it had been for the last twenty million years.

Panic is temporary; every adrenaline rush eventually runs empty. Even the most devoted parent has to sleep on occasion, and breathe, and somehow eat enough to sustain a minimal level of life. That's why a new, more enduring species of misery evolves for the afflicted. Over the next several weeks, I watched my friends carefully reconfigure their misery. They learned how to sleep and eat again, and for a few moments each day, they would find some tiny activity that had absolutely nothing to do with their missing son. Normal work was impossible. Amanda exhausted her sick days and vacation days, while Don simply took an unpaid leave of absence. Like never before, they became a couple. A team. Two heads united by the unwavering mission — to find and reclaim LD before he forever escaped their grasp.

"I almost envy those two," Cheryl confided to me. "It's sick to think this. But when have our lives enjoyed half that much purpose? Or a tenth the importance?"

"Never," I had to agree.

In my own sorry way, I was angry about what LD was doing to my old friendship. After those first days of pure terror, Don stopped calling. He didn't have the energy or need to keep me abreast of every little clue and dead end. There were many days when I didn't once hear from the man. He was too busy researching the Kuipers. Or he had to interview experts on missing people. Or there were night flights to distant cities and important meetings with government officials, or patient astronomers, or one of the very few practicing exobiologists. Plus there were some secretive exchanges with borderline figures who might or might not have real help to offer.

We tried to keep meeting to play chess, but the poor guy couldn't recall what he had told me already. Again and again, he explained that his son was still somewhere on the Earth, probably somewhere close by. The Kuipers' version of boot camp required eighty-seven days of intense simulations and language immersion, technical training and cultural blending. That was what every verified account claimed. Perhaps as many as three percent of the recruits failed this stage, earning a scrubbed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

memory of recent events and transport back home again. "But those numbers are suspicious," Don said. "There's no telling how many young men pretend amnesia to explain a few missing months."

From the beginning, the same relentless rumors had been circulating about secret training bases on the ocean floor or beneath the South Pole. Various governments, and particularly the U.S. government, were said to be in cahoots with the Kuipers, giving them old air bases in exchange for top-secret technologies. The truth, however, was less spectacular and infinitely more practical for the job at hand.

Not to mention far, far stranger.

"LD is somewhere close," Don kept telling me.

And himself.

Witnesses were scarce, and the memories of the veterans were short on details. But each would-be soldier was encased inside an elaborate suit, armored and invisible to human sensors. For the next thirty years, that suit would be his shell and home. For the moment, both it and its living cargo were buried deep in some out-of-the-way ground. There was no telling where. Somewhere within a hundred miles of our little table, LD was living a cicada's subterranean existence, experiencing what the aliens wanted him to experience, making him ready for the adventure of a lifetime.

"We've got two months to find him," Don told me.

If his son had actually joined the Kuipers, I thought to myself.

Later, he announced, "We have six weeks left."

"Plenty of time," I lied, looking at the fresh dirt under his fingernails.

Then he said, "Four weeks, and a day."

"Maybe he'll be one of the dropouts," I said hopefully.

For the first time, LD's father was hoping for failure. But saying so would jinx everything. I could see that in his stiff mouth, in his downcast eyes. Don was turning into a superstitious old fool, not allowing himself even to smile at the prospect: The powerless victim of grand forces beyond his control, with nothing in his corner but the negligible possibility of a little good luck.

"Two weeks left, minus twelve hours."

We were sitting in the coffee shop. This was our usual day for chess, though we hadn't managed a full game in weeks. Don always brought his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

laptop, leaping around the Web while we suffered through a halting, chaotic conversation.

Three times in three minutes, Don glanced at his watch.

"Expecting somebody?" I finally asked.

"I am," he admitted.

I waited for the full answer. When none came, I asked outright, "So, whom are we expecting?"

Don smiled, anguish swirled with anticipation. "Somebody important," he mentioned. "Somebody who can help us."

Then he gave the coffee shop door a long hard stare.

I made one wrong guess. "Is it a parent?"

There were thousands like Don, and the Internet allowed them to meet and commune, sharing gossip and useful tips. Our particular town was too small to have its own support group, but every Sunday, Don and Amanda drove to Kansas City in order to sit in a stuffy room and drink coffee with people a little farther along in their misery.

Maybe one of those Kansas City friends was dropping by, I reasoned.

But Don said, "No," and then his tired eyes blinked.

Glancing over my shoulder, I understood.

Our visitor was in his middle sixties, and he didn't look too awful. I would have expected a limp or maybe stumps in place of hands. But no, the gentleman could have been any newly retired citizen, respectable and even a little bland. He stood at the door, taking in the room as if weighing all the hazards. And then I noticed his tailored clothes and the polished leather shoes, a little old-fashioned but obviously expensive.

Some veterans returned to Earth with gems in their loot. But to my knowledge, not one ever sold his treasures, since each item carried some embedded significance far beyond commercial gain.

To myself, I whispered, "Where do you get your money, stranger?"

"I'm sorry," Don told me, sounding decidedly unsorry. "I should have warned you. Just this morning, I learned this fellow was passing through, and I was lucky enough to get his number and arrange this. This meeting."

Don hurriedly gathered up his belongings. The laptop. The labeled folders. A notebook full of intense scribbles. And finally, half a cup of black Sumatran. Then he threw a careless look over his shoulder, telling me, "Stay, if you want. Or I can call you afterward, tell you how it went."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Okay, Don. Good luck."

Because I was his friend, I stayed. To keep busy, I brought out my own laptop and searched through the Wikipedia list of confirmed veterans. Meanwhile the two strangers shook hands and sat in back, across from each other in a little booth. I heard a few words from our honored guest, and reading the accent, I moved to the Russian portion of the database, bringing up a series of portraits.

Thirty-five years ago, a talented young art student slipped out of his parents' Moscow apartment and vanished.

I could almost understand it: A Russian might prefer fighting aliens among the stars over trying to survive the next three decades inside a tottering communist empire.

The two old boys chatted amiably for several minutes.

Then the Russian mentioned something about his time and his considerable trouble, and Don pulled an envelope from his pocket and passed it over. The Russian opened the gift with a penknife waiting at the ready, using fingers and eyes to count the bills and their denominations until he was satisfied enough to continue.

Cheryl had warned me.

"Our friends are spending their life savings," she said just the other night. "Any person or little group that might help find LD gets a check, and sometimes several checks."

"Don's no fool," I had claimed. "He wouldn't just throw his money away."

"But a lot of scam artists are working this angle," she added. "Anybody with a missing son is going to be susceptible."

Those words came back to me now.

Who actually compiled these lists of Kuiper veterans? Russia wasn't a bastion of honest government and equal opportunity. I could envision somebody bribing the right people and then setting off for the West, retelling stories that were public legends by now, and helping no one but their parasitic selves.

The Russian seemed vigorous and fit.

I couldn't get past that.

After half an hour of intense conversation and coffee, Don had to slip off to the bathroom. He barely gave me a nod as he passed by. I stood and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

walked over, not asking permission when I sat beside the Russian, introducing myself without offering my hand and then asking pointblank, "So what are you and my good friend talking about?"

I can't say why, but that's when my initial suspicions collapsed.

Maybe it was the man's face, which up close revealed delicate and unusual burn scars. Or maybe it was the straight white line running from the back of his hand up his forearm and under his sleeve. Or it was the smell rising from his body — something I'd read about but never experienced — that faintly medical stink born from a diet of alien chow and peculiar water.

But mostly, what convinced me were the man's haunted blue eyes.

"The training," said a deep, ragged voice. "Donald wants to know about the training. About what his son is enduring now."

"Can you help him?"

"I am trying to."

"Help me now," I pleaded. Then after a deep breath, I added, "But I'm not going to pay you anything."

The blue eyes entertained their own suspicions.

"Why now?" I asked. "If this war's been going on forever, why just in these last forty years have the Kuipers started coming here?"

He said nothing.

"Does their war need fresh blood? Are they short of bodies to fight their ugly fight, maybe?"

"No," he said once, mildly.

And then louder, with authority, he said, "Hardly."

"But why now?"

"Because forty years ago, my benefactors came to the conclusion that it was possible for humans to observe their world. We had not yet discovered it, no. But just the possibility was critical to the ceremony. Because all who can see what is transpiring must be made welcome — "

"Ceremony?" I interrupted. "What does that mean?"

"Exactly what you would expect the word to mean," he claimed. Then he leaned closer to me, his breath stinking of alien chemicals that still swam in his blood. "What you call a war is not. More than anything, the ceremony is a religious event. It is a pageant of great beauty and much elegance, and by comparison, all human beliefs are cluttered little affairs

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

without a thousandth the importance that one day up there brings to the open soul."

As the Russian spoke to me, Don returned.

"I miss that world," said the one-time recruit. "I miss the beauty of it. The power of it. The intensity and importance of each vivid, thrilling moment." He broke into some kind of Creole jabber — a mixture of Earthly languages and Kuiper that must have been better suited to describe his lost, much beloved life. Then he concluded by telling me, "Belonging to one nest while serving my good elders, standing limb to limb with my brethren...I miss that every waking moment, every dreaming moment...constantly, I find myself wishing I could return again to that good, great place...."

"Is that what it is?" I asked. "A great place?"

"I do envy that boy of his," the Russian said to me.

Maybe I smiled, just a little. Just to hear that more than survival was possible, that poor LD could actually find happiness.

But Don roared, "Get out of here!"

I thought he was speaking to the Russian, and I was right.

And I was wrong.

"Both of you," my best friend snapped. "I don't want to hear this anymore. 'The beauty. The power.' I want you to leave me alone! Goddamn it, go!"

I FELT AWFUL for what I had done, or what I had neglected to do. For the next couple nights, I lay awake replaying the conversation and the yelling that followed. In my charitable moments I would blame exhaustion and despair for Don's graceless temper. Because what did I do wrong? Nothing, I told myself, and certainly nothing intentional.

After that, I called Don half a dozen times, making various apologies to his voice mail.

Eventually Cheryl heard from Amanda. Their thirty-second phone conversation translated into a five-minute lecture from my wife.

"Here's what you have to understand, John. These next days are critical. There won't be another chance to save LD. They have leads about where he might be, which is something. Very unusual, and maybe they will manage to find him — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"And accomplish what?" I interrupted.

She looked at me with outrage and pity.

"Has any recruit ever been found like this?" I asked.

"Maybe," Cheryl said. "Two or three times, perhaps."

"And talked out of leaving?"

She had to admit, "No."

But then with her next breath, she said, "This is about LD's parents. This is about them doing their very best. They can't let this moment escape without putting up a fight. And what Amanda says...the way that you've been acting around Don...it's as if you don't want to believe just how awful this mess is...."

What did I believe?

"Doubt is a luxury they can't afford now," Cheryl explained. "And you're going to have to give Don space, if you're not going to help."

"But I want to help," I pleaded.

"Then stop calling him, honey. He's got enough guilt in his head without hearing your voice every day too."

One week remained.

Two days.

And then on the eighty-sixth day after LD's disappearance, an unexpected voice came searching for me, along with a very pleasant face and a sober, well-considered attitude.

"Hey, John."

"Morgan?" I sputtered.

"Can I come in? Just for a minute, please. It's about my brother."

We welcomed her. Of course we welcomed the young woman, offering our guest a cold drink and the best chair and our undivided attention. Morgan was being truthful when she said she had just a few minutes to spend with us. A list of people needed to be seen, and soon. A phone call or the Internet would have worked just as well, but with some of these names — us in particular — she felt that it was best to come personally.

"A favor, John? Cheryl?"

Her shy smile made me flinch. "Anything," I said for both of us.

"We have three areas to watch tonight," she reported. "Three pastures,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scattered but close to town. There's evidence — different kinds of evidence — that LD's buried in one of them. Although it's probably none of them, and this is a long shot at best."

Cheryl asked, "Which pasture do we watch?"

"Here." On a photocopy of a map, she had circled eighty acres in the southeast corner of the county. "Really, the only reason to think LD's there is a farmer thinks he saw odd lights moving in the grass. And he's halfway sure it was the same night my brother vanished."

A very long shot.

But I said, "We'll be there, Morgan."

"There's going to be others out there with you. Cousins of mine, and some friends, and a lot of volunteers from all over. But most of us, including me...we'll be at the north site."

"Is that place more promising?" my wife asked.

Morgan nodded. "We have a reliable witness who saw LD, or somebody like him, walking across an empty corn field in the middle of the night." She rolled her shoulders with a skeptical gesture. Then as she stood again, she said, "Thank you. For everything, I mean."

"We want to help," Cheryl promised.

Morgan looked straight at me.

Then despite the crush of time, she hesitated. Standing at our front door, Morgan spent three minutes making small talk. With a grin, she told us about the evening we'd come to their house to grill out, and while her brother put on a show for everyone, clowning around and throwing the football a mile into the air, I had taken the time to come over and sit with the ignored sister.

I had no recollection of the moment.

But Morgan did, and years later it was a cherished incident worth retelling. Then she looked at neither one of us, shaking her head. "Want to know the truth?" she asked with a conspiratorial tone. "Half of me believes Little Donnie is faking this. Just for fun. Just to see everybody jump and weep."

The big sister who had never shown a trace of jealousy said those hard, unsentimental words.

"He would love tonight," she told us. "All this effort on his behalf...he would find it to be absolutely lovely...."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

The evening began with showers and then a hard cold rain mixed with biting sleet. Cheryl and I packed for any weather. We arrived early, pulling off the country road and waiting in the gathering darkness. Several dozen searchers were expected, half of whom never showed. In the end, it was a gathering of distant relations and friends from Don's work who stood on the mud, coming up with a battle plan. Because nobody else volunteered, Cheryl and I took the far end of the pasture. LD's parents had been over this ground a dozen times. But we were told to look for signs of fresh digging that they might have missed, and to be most alert sometime before dawn. If the most common scenario played out, the new recruit would emerge from his hiding place then, still wearing his warrior suit.

With my wife beside me, I walked across the wet, cold, and shaggy brome. At the fence line, she went to the right and I went left, her flashlight soon vanishing in a rain that refused to quit.

In the end, I had no idea where I was.

Three in the morning, full of coffee and desperate for sleep, I walked the same ground that Don had searched in broad daylight. The mission was impossible, if the mission was to discover LD. But in my mind, what I was doing was saving a friendship that I hadn't cherished enough.

By four, I was too tired to even pretend to search.

By five in the morning, clear skies arrived along with the sudden glow of a thousand stars.

Change one turn that night, or pause in a different spot, and I would have heard nothing.

And even what I heard was insignificant enough to ignore.

What I was reminded of was the sound of an old-fashioned thermostat. That's all. The soft click that meant the furnace was about to kick on, except that I heard the click repeating itself every few seconds.

I turned toward the sound.

My flashlight was off, my eyes adjusted to the starlight. Even though it probably wouldn't do any good, I tried for stealth — a quiet stride and a steadiness of motion.

At some point, the clicking stopped.

I halted.

Then a slab of late-season grass, blond and shaggy, lifted up on my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

right. It was maybe ten feet from me. There was no disturbed area there before, I'm sure. Afterward I couldn't find any trace of the hole where our newest recruit was undergoing his indoctrinations. But there he was, rising up from that random patch of ground. I saw the head. The broad shoulders. Arms and long legs. All those good human parts encased inside a suit that seemed neither large nor particularly massive, or for that matter, all that tough either.

From behind, he looked like LD dressed up for a Halloween party, pretending to be a cut-rate astronaut.

I said, "Donnie."

My voice was little more than a whisper.

The shape turned with a smooth suddenness, as if it knew that I was there and wasn't surprised, but maybe it wasn't sure of my motives. LD pivoted, and then a face that I couldn't quite make out stared at me through a shield of glass or diamond or who-knew-what.

"How's that big bike ride coming?" I asked.

LD stepped closer.

It did occur to me, just then, that maybe there was a good reason why no one had ever seen a recruit leaving for space. Witnesses weren't allowed. But even if the kid was twice my strength, he did nothing to me. He just stepped close enough so that I could make out his features and he could see mine, and with a satisfied sound, he said, "If it has to be someone, John, I'm glad it is you."

Maybe the feeling was mutual.

But I didn't say that. Instead, I decided to lay things out as clearly and brutally as I could. "Your folks are sick with worry. They've spent their savings and every emotional resource, and after tonight, they will be ruined. They'll be old and beaten down, and for the rest of their lives, they won't enjoy one good happy day."

"No," said LD.

"What does that mean?"

"They will recover just fine," he claimed. "People are strong, John. Amazingly strong. We can endure far more than you realize."

The wee hours of the most unlikely morning, and I was getting a pep talk from a college dropout.

"Donnie," I said. "You are a spoiled little brat."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That chiseled, utterly handsome face just smiled at my inconsequential opinion.

"So much promise," I said, "and what are you doing with it? Going off to fight some idiotic alien war?"

Inside his battle helmet, the boy shook his head. "Where I will be is on a large world that is more beautiful and more complex than you could ever envision."

Could I hit him with something? A rock or a log? Or maybe a devastating chunk of bloody guilt?

But I had the impression that his flimsy suit wasn't weak at all.

"I am needed up there," LD said.

"Are you sure?"

"More than I am needed down here, yes." He said it simply, calmly. And I suppose that's when I realized that not only did he mean what he was saying, but that in deep ways, he was probably right.

I didn't have anything left to offer.

"John?" the boy asked. "Would you do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Turn around for a moment."

If there was a noise when he left, I didn't hear it. And maybe there was motion, a sense of mass displaced into an endless sky. But at that moment, all I could feel was the beating of my heart and that slight but genuine anguish that comes when you wish it was you bound for places unseen.

MORE THAN a hundred people had searched in the rain for LD, and all but one openly confessed to seeing nothing and no one. I was the lone dissenter. I said nothing, and not even Cheryl could make me confess what happened, though I know she sensed that I had seen more than nothing while we were apart.

To Don, I said simply, "Come to chess tomorrow. The usual place."

He was at the coffee shop before me, and I was early. He had his board set up, and he looked exactly as I expected him to look: Exhausted and pained, weak and frail.

I picked up my queen's pawn and then put it down again.

Then quietly, I told him what I had seen and everything that I had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

done in the backstretches of that pasture, trying to win over the heart of a boy that really, when you got down to it, I barely knew.

Don nodded.

With a voice less than quiet, he halfway accused me of not doing enough to save LD from his own childish nonsense.

But what more could I have done?

That's what I thought, and maybe he did too. Then he sat back — a defeated father who would surely never see his son again — and with a mournful voice, he asked, "Is there anything else?"

Then I lied.

I said, "Yeah, there's more."

I smiled enough to bring him forward again, elbows to his knees as he waited for whatever I said next.

"Donnie wanted me to tell you something."

"What?"

"That he's going up there for one reason only: He wants to put an end to that awful ancient war. He's not going to fight anyone, but instead he'll reason with the Kuipers and show them that it's better to live in peace."

A staggering lie, that was. Unbelievable to its core.

But Don accepted my words without complaint. He sat back in his chair, his shoulders relaxing and then his face too. And being his friend for years told me that here, with just a few words, I had made it easier for him to sleep easy, and if not tonight, sometime soon.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THE CONTENTS OF our January issue aren't finalized yet, but we expect to bring you the following stories in the next month or two:

• "The Minuteman's Witch" by Charles Coleman Finlay, a fantasy set in the early days of the American Revolution.

• "Shadow of the Valley" by Fred Chappell, a new story in the series concerning shadow-dealer Astolfo and his colleagues.

We've also got stories in the works by Carol Emshwiller, Jerry Oltion, Yoon Ha Lee, Dean Whitlock, and Jim Aikin, to name just a few.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Gordon first told me of his plan to reprint some stories from F&SF*'s past as a way to celebrate our sixtieth anniversary year, I immediately suggested that we choose stories that were on the obscure side, rather than reprinting any of the numerous classics we've published. In fact, what I said was that we should reprint stories like this one by Warner Law because, to me, it's a quintessential* F&SF *story — it's both literary and quirky, with just the right amount of demented charm.*

Warner Law is a writer who is probably not familiar to many fantasy readers. He was primarily a writer for television and radio who later turned his hand to prose, but died of cancer at the age of sixty before his short fiction career could take off. However, he did publish two stories in F&SF *and has appeared in* The Saturday Evening Post *and* Playboy*, and his first published story won the Edgar Award.*

"The Alarming Letters from Scottsdale" was originally published in our April 1973 issue.

—John Joseph Adams

The Alarming Letters from Scottsdale

By Warner Law

C. BENNINTON & SON
PUBLISHERS
551 FIFTH AVE.
NEW YORK 10071

May 27, 1972

Henry Hesketh, Esq.
"Hesketh Hill"
Rural Route #1
Scottsdale
Arizona 85256

Dear Godfather Henry:

Hello, there! How are you? Long time no hear. How comes the newest Homer McGrew mystery novel? It's been over three months since Dad

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and I responded enthusiastically to your outline, and not even a note from you.

As you well know, if we don't get the manuscript soon, it will be too late for our Fall list, which would mean that for the first time in nineteen years there won't be a new Homer McGrew for Christmas.

Since you live all alone up in that hilltop showplace without a phone, we worry when you don't keep in touch.

Dad is away on his annual European business trek, so I'll be minding the store until he gets back.

Do drop me a line, soon.

Your loving Godson,
Bill Benninton

#

HESKETH HILL
SCOTTSDALE
ARIZONA

June 1, 1972

Dear Godson Bill:

I am just fine, but thanks for wondering. I hadn't realized so much time had gone by.

I was halfway through the new Homer McGrew when I was captured by a dog.

That is, I was cooking beef stew à la Erle Stanley Gardner — I wheedled his recipe from him, years back — when a large dog walked in my kitchen. He looked to be a cross between a German shepherd and something, and he was painfully thin and obviously starving. So of course I gave him some stew, and he hasn't left my side to this day. I've never had a dog before, ever.

He wore no collar. I tried to find his owner, but failed. He's far from a cute or even handsome dog; he looks to be a dignified ten or so years old.

But he has remarkable eyes. They are clear and direct and intelligent,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and they remind me strongly of the eyes of Dashiell Hammett, whom I first met in the '30's, when he was pioneering the tough detective novel, and had just become famous for *The Maltese Falcon.* Hammett was not only my close friend but my teacher; much of what I know about the mystery novel came from him. He also spent a long weekend here with me a few years before his death in 1961. Anyways, in his honor I've named the dog Dashiell — Dash, for short. He seldom leaves my side, and even insists on sleeping on the foot of my bed, which is sometimes not too comfortable for me because he's gained considerable weight.

Dash sits now at my feet as I type, and whenever I pause he slaps a foot with a paw as if to say, "Get back to work, you lazy lout!" I imagine he merely likes the clatter of the electric typewriter.

But I swear to you that Dash is close to being human; he seems to understand every word I say. And — don't laugh, now — he even helps me with my story problems. That is, whenever my plot could go one way or another, I explain the alternatives to him — trying to use the same tone of voice — and Dash listens attentively. When he doesn't fancy my suggestions, he lays his head on the floor and sighs wearily; when he does like an idea, his eyes light up — just as Dashiell Hammett's used to when he encouraged me — and he slaps his tail vigorously on the carpet. Dash has saved me from going up many blind alleys.

Anyway, I've decided to put Homer McGrew aside and write instead a book titled: *Dash — My Exciting True Life Experiences as a Dog Detective.* It will be written by Dash himself in the first person, "As Told To Henry Hesketh." Naturally, I will have to do considerable inventing.

Please give my love to father Cyrus when next you write him.

Love,
Henry

#

June 8, 1972

Dear Henry:

I was relieved to hear that you're well, and pleased that you've found

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

such a good friend in Dash. A book about a dog detective might well be a fine idea. After all, Lassie herself often plays a detective role.

However, might it not be better to finish the Homer McGrew first? You will disappoint many, many of your eager fans if there's not a new mystery novel from you this year.

By the way, I've just learned that Homer is nudging Perry Mason in total paperback sales. This is no small achievement, and I don't think you'll ever have to worry about money, for as long as you live.

I feel I should warn you that Dad has always had an aversion to what he calls "literary anthropomorphism," by which he means the ascription of human qualities to things not human. He will not read — let alone publish — books written in the first person by dogs, cats, parrots, automobiles, or frying pans. He was once sent into such a rage by a four-pound manuscript titled: *I Was an Unslothful Three-toed Sloth* that he broke his office window with it and it fell six stories down to the street and narrowly missed Bennett Cerf, who happened to be walking by.

Dad is fully aware that many good writers have written successfully in this manner, but it's simply not his cup of tea.

Had you considered writing about Dash in the third person?

Dad writes from London that his trip is going well. Next stop, Edinburgh.

Love,
Bill

#

June 12,1972

Dear Bill:

I'm sorry, but I have grown goddamn weary of Homer McGrew over the years, and I'd like to write something else for a change.

But apart from this, your letter upset me and made me unhappy, and when I read the letter aloud to Dash, he listened with hurt eyes and then went into a corner and whimpered.

But I will let Dash speak for himself: Dear Mr. Benninton:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I was considerably disappointed to hear that your father would not be interested in the book I am writing about my life as a Dog Detective, in the first person.

The reason that Henry wants *me* to write the book is because he wants the reader to know how I really think about things, rather than what Henry *thinks* I think.

Would you believe that I'm learning to TYPE!? Yes, I AM! One night when Henry went to bed, he left his electric typewriter running by mistake, and I wandered into his office and got into his chair and began to strike the letters with my paws. I like the sound it makes. I like best the automatic repeating keys that go XXXXXXX AND.....

Henry heard me typing and came in and was amazed, but was a little disappointed because what I typed made no sense at all. But then my paws are so big I can't strike one key at a time.

Then Henry got a wonderful idea, and he took two unsharpened pencils and fastened them to my front paws with adhesive tape, so that the eraser ends stuck out three or so inches past my paws, and with these pencils I can touch one key at a time.

Henry sits me in his typing chair with a strap around me so I won't fall forwards or sideways.

Then he holds my paws and touches the keys with the pencils, and black marks appear on the paper, like magic!

Here is an example of my typing:

HII XXXXXXXXXXTH ERE!! THID ID DADH TYXXXXXXXXXXPINGGGG!!!....

Of course I make mistakes. But I am learning about the space bar and the automatic carriage return, which I like to hit because they make nice noises.

Now, Henry is trying to teach me to type *without* holding my paws. He thinks I might learn to type my own name — by rote, as it were. He is using what he calls the "conditioned reflex and reward system." He points to the letter "D," and if I strike it I get one of the tidbits I like, such as foie gras on a cracker, or a chocolate-covered cherry. Then if I next hit an "A" I get another tidbit.

The story of my life is coming along fine! Yesterday I wrote a chapter about my very first case as a Detective. In it, I tracked some hijackers to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

their hideout and was held prisoner by them. But I found an electric light wall switch and I turned it off and on and off and on and the police finally saw it and came and captured the crooks.

Now I am going to try to type all by myself!

Your pal,
DASXX DAS...H

P.S. I think that is pretty good for a dog!!

#

June 15, 1972

Cyrus Benninton, Esq.
The George Hotel
Edinburgh
Scotland

Dear Dad:

I'm enclosing some recent letters between Henry Hesketh and myself. I'm more than a little worried; I feel he's on the verge of flipping.

Were he another kind of writer, I wouldn't be too concerned. But Henry has always been as tough-minded and as cynical and as hard-headed as his own Homer McGrew.

It's not that I'm greatly concerned about getting a new mystery out of him; it's his state of mind that worries me.

Do you have any suggestions as to what I might do to help ease him through and then out of his present mental condition?

Your loving son,
Bill

#

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

June 18, 1972

Dear Son:

I'm gravely concerned by what Henry's letters reveal. The fact that he is still a good writer makes me have continually to remind myself that poor Dash can't be held responsible for what Henry keeps putting into his mind. The poor dog is just sitting in his dignity in his corner minding his own business — or sitting under duress at Henry's typewriter and being bribed by tidbits — while Henry imagines what is going on in the dog's nonexistent conscious mind.

This damn dog fixation and this rather sickening cuteness run directly counter to Henry's nature — as I've come to know it over twenty-seven years.

It must be remembered that Henry is pushing seventy-five, and that he boozes it up quite a bit, and has been through five marriages, but has lived all alone on his hill for the last eleven years.

Don't forget also that Henry began as a serious novelist, but failed, and then turned to writing Homer McGrews. These made him rich, but he's always thought of himself as a failure.

Although literary anthropomorphism may not be my cup of tea, I do find some charm in it, in moderation, for it's after all a conscious effort of the mind to project itself into the minds of animals, thus making us feel less alone in our trip through Space-Time.

But there is a big difference between this conscious projection and an unconscious removal of part of the mind into the imagined minds of animals. It's similar to retreating into a dream world to escape the real world.

This is what Henry's doing, and it could well mean that he is hiding that part of himself which he dislikes in the "mind" of his dog. This is close to being a kind of death wish; it could presage suicide.

I of course feel sorry for Dash, who is slowly being murdered. Not so much by Henry. After all, Dash could refuse all those fattening tidbits, or he could run away. But, lacking any consciousness of self, the dog is being killed by his incapacity to deny his own appetites.

To be practical: I have two suggestions. The first is that you get from your Uncle Fred the name of a good Scottsdale psychiatrist, and have him standing by.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The second is that you put your tongue in your cheek and write a letter of encouragement about Dash's autobiography. Lie about me, if it helps. It's possible that Henry could purge himself of this nonsense by finishing the book.

Surely there cannot be more than *one* book in this dog. Unless, of course, Henry should teach the dog to play the piano. A second volume, titled: *How I Played Chopin in Carnegie Hall* is a fearful prospect.

I joke because I am really quite worried about Henry. Edinburgh I find a lonely city. That I love you goes without saying. That I miss you I will say.

Dad

#

June 23, 1972

Dear Friend Dash:

Thanks so much for the letter. I think it's wonderful that you're learning to type! Maybe you will get so good that you can type your whole book all by yourself! The more I read what you write, the more I like the idea of your own book in your own words about your own exciting life as a Dog Detective.

Dad has changed his mind and would love to publish your book. So hurry and finish it, fella! My best to Henry.

Your pal,
Bill Benninton

#

C. BENNINTON & SON
PUBLISHERS
551 FIFTH AVE.
NEW YORK 10071

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

June 23, 1972

Harold F. Seller, MD
Medical-Dental Bldg.
Scottsdale, Arizona

Dear Dr. Seller:

Dr. Frederick Carter of this city has given me your name. He is my uncle, and he remembers you well from Menninger Clinic days. He thinks you might be willing to help my father and myself with a problem.

As you may know, the novelist Henry Hesketh lives outside Scottsdale. We've published his Homer McGrew mysteries for many years, and he's my father's close friend, and also my godfather.

Recently, my father and myself have become increasingly disturbed by his letters to me. Put bluntly and unscientifically, they seem to indicate a growing mental disturbance in relation to his pet dog. More than that I don't think I should say, lest you prejudge him.

We are hoping that this condition will pass. But if it worsens, would it be possible for you to visit Henry Hesketh on some pretext, and give us your impression of his behavior? It goes without saying that we would expect to pay you a fee for this.

Cordially,
William Benninton

#

June 27, 1972

Dear Bill:

Henry says I can call you by your first name. I am so thrilled that you and your father like the idea of my book after all!

I am now writing a chapter about my last master who was so angry with me because I could not learn the MORSE CODE and he was mean and beat me with a stick and let me get all skinny and hungry all the time. So I jumped out of a truck near Scottsdale and looked around, hoping I'd find

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

some nice person. I am so happy it was Henry, because he has given me such a nice warm home and lots of affection and he feeds me so GOOD!

My typing is coming along just fine! Henry doesn't have to point at the letters anymore. I have made a connection in my mind between the SOUND of the letters and the various keys, and so Henry stands by me and TELLS me the letters and I try to hit the right ones, and if I do I get a tidbit. Henry has found that next to chocolate cherries I like caviar on a cracker the best. The real caviar, all the way from Iran! I eat a whole big jar every day.

Henry found me a big pair of glasses without any lenses in them and he puts them on my head with a rubber band. He's also bought me a baseball cap which he puts on my head backwards. I didn't like these at first because they are scarcely dignified, but Henry says I look distinguished and he has taken photos of me at the typewriter, to illustrate my book.

Henry and I have so many good times together. Except I was a BAD DOG the other night. Henry never sleeps very well, and this night he had a few boozies and some sleeping pills, and he always sleeps with his head under his pillow, and anyway during the night I got so lonely I came up the bed and went to sleep on Henry's pillow and almost smothered him! So now I have to sleep on his feet and not on his head.

Henry says I should type something all by myself to end this letter. Here it is. Henry is going to leave the room.

XXXXXXXXXX....HI THER ...E THID IDDASHTY XXXXXXX XXXXPINGGG BYEB.....YE

P.S. Henry came back and said that was so good that I am going to get a chocolate eclair full of real whipped cream!

#

HAROLD F. SELLER, MD
MEDICAL-DENTAL BLDG.
SCOTTSDALE
ARIZONA

June 28, 1972

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dear Mr. Benninton:

On a professional basis I would be extremely reluctant to intrude upon the privacy of Henry Hesketh.

However, as it happens I know him, casually. I met him first in a local bookstore, some months ago. I told him I was a Homer McGrew fan, and that I was lucky enough to own some rare first editions of the earliest books. He said that if I ever wished them autographed, I should stop by his house.

Time passed, and I never got around to it. A month ago I met him in the street. He reminded me I hadn't been by with my books.

I still haven't paid him the visit. But should you tell me you feel the need has arisen, I will make a point of dropping by, since I have a valid reason.

I won't do this as a doctor. Forget any fee. I will do it because I admire Hesketh, and because Fred Carter is an old friend, and because you and your father are so obviously concerned, and also, because we are all members of the human race together.

Sincerely,
Harold F. Seller

#

July 5, 1972

HIII THEREXXXXX THIDID
DAS HTYXXXX PING.....

Dear Bill:

Do you know that I typed that all by myself, when Henry was asleep? Yes, I did!

Henry leaves the pencils on my paws all night, and his electric typewriter humming and his light on in his office, because sometimes in the night I come in and jump into his chair and support myself with my left paw on the lid of the typewriter and strike the keys with the pencil on my right paw. Henry comes in and finds my typing in the morning, and if it makes any sense at all he gives me a big dish of LOBSTER NEWBURG for my breakfast.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I've just written a wonderful chapter about how I went after and tracked down a mean old porcupine who had been girdling and killing Henry's big pine trees, except that when I caught the animal I got a lot of his NASTY quills in my face and nose. Henry had to pull them all out one by one and it HURT! OoooooooH! But Henry kissed it well and the pain has gone ALL AWAY.

Henry has ordered an electric organ for me. He is going to teach me to play BACH on it! Whatever that is. He says if I get good enough maybe I can give a little recital in a church he knows, near here. He says I can also make some recordings, and sell them to lots of people! Bye, bye, now. I am going to type again just for you.

HI THER ETHID IS DAS HT XXXXYPING....BYEBYEE EEEXXXXXX

#

NEW YORK NY SRX TC 559 JUL 7 72 HAROLD SELLER MD MEDICAL DENTAL BLDG SCOTTSDALE ARIZ 2:22 PM

I FEEL IT WOULD BE WISE IF YOU WOULD VISIT HESKETH AT YOUR EARLY CONVENIENCE

BENNINTON

#

SCOTTSDALE ARIZ PFG 732 JULY 8 72 BENNINTON 551 FIFTH AVE NYC 11:23 AM

I AM GRIEVED TO REPORT THAT WHEN I VISITED HESKETH THIS MORNING I FOUND THAT HE HAD DIED IN HIS SLEEP. AUTHORITIES NOTIFIED. WRITING DETAILS. MY SYMPATHY TO YOU.

SELLER

#

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HAROLD F. SELLER , MD
MEDICAL-DENTAL BLDG.
SCOTTSDALE
ARIZONA

July 8, 1972

Dear Mr. Benninton:

Again let me extend my sympathy to you and your father. I realize you have lost a dear friend.

I drove to Hesketh's house around nine this morning. There was no answer to my several rings, but a dog barked inside. When no one came to the door, I decided to leave.

But as I was walking back to my car, a huge dog came around the corner of the house and up to me. He is the most monstrously obese dog I've ever seen. He is so outrageously fat he can scarcely walk. Also, and this puzzled me at first, there were pencils taped to his paws — eraser ends protruding. I finally guessed that their purpose was to keep him from scratching himself.

The dog indicated I should come with him, and he led me around the house to an open glass door. It was through this that I found Hesketh in his bed, his head under his pillow. He had been dead for some hours.

The blueness of his skin clearly indicated asphyxia. But how? There was no sign of any struggle.

Three clues gave me a probable answer. There were a few remaining drops of whiskey in a glass on the bedside table. There was also a bottle of sleeping pills. In addition, the top side of his pillow was covered with dog hairs.

So I can only conclude that Hesketh had ingested both alcohol and barbiturates, and went to sleep with his head under his pillow. Suicide is not indicated, for the sleeping pill bottle was very nearly full. I feel sure he would have awakened in the morning.

But I fear that during the night this huge dog came and lay upon his master's pillow and suffocated Hesketh while he remained in an intensely deep sleep.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It is tragic and ironic and somewhat incredible, but it is certainly physically possible, considering the great weight of the dog.

I then walked around the house to find a phone, but there is none. Nothing was amiss, but Hesketh's electric typewriter had been left running in his office, and his desk lamp was on. While switching off the typewriter, I noticed some typing in the machine. I tried to read it, but couldn't. It is gibberish — typed, I fear, by a man who has had quite a few drinks and pills and is falling asleep at his typewriter. Or, possibly, it could be some kind of code, but I greatly doubt it. I pulled this typing out of the machine because I didn't want to have anyone find it and try to make something out of it. The circumstances of Hesketh's death will make enough newspaper copy as it is.

When I left the house the dog was anxious to come with me, and so I took him.

After reporting the news to the sheriff's office in person, I stopped off with the dog at the office of a veterinary surgeon friend.

When he examined the dog he was gravely shocked — even horrified. He said he had never seen a dog who had been so grossly overfed. He surmised that the dog had been deprived of proper food and had been fed large quantities of sugars and fats. He told me that if this diet had continued much longer the poor dog was doomed to die.

I have decided to keep the dog, until and unless someone lays claim to him. I would like to restore him to good condition, with a proper diet and exercise.

Also, I find the dog tremendously appealing. He is affectionate, and in his ability to understand my every word he seems close to being human.

I've lived alone since my wife died two years ago, and I'll be happy to have the dog for company. He will have a good home with me.

Sincerely,
Harold F. Seller

P.S. I enclose the sheet of paper I found in Hesketh's typewriter. It's possible that this random typing might make some sense to you, although I very much doubt it.

H.F.S.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TH ISISD ASHT
YPING.....IW XXXX
ASBEI INGMUR D
ERE DBY MYI
NABI LI TYTOC
ONQ UERM YO
WNGREE D.....
ITWA SEI THERH
E N R Y O R M E
X X X X X X X IAMDO
UBL YSOR RYF
O RMYC RIME BEC
A U S E N O W I NM
....YNEX TREIN
CARNA TIONI WI
LLHAV ETOCO
M E BAC KASANEV
.....ENLOW ERCREA
TUR ESUCHASARA
T XXXXXXXXX THI
SIS DAS HIELLHA
MMETTT YPING
.....

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As we've seen many times (most recently with "The Overseer" in our March 2008 issue), Albert Cowdrey excels at Southern tales of the supernatural. This month he offers us another such yarn, a light-hearted tale that turns askew one of the great conventions of the ghost story genre.

A Skeptical Spirit

By Albert E. Cowdrey

ALBION MERKEL MAY HAVE been a bit mad, but that was par for the course in the small Delta city of Bonaparte, Mississippi, whither (as they say in old novels) he had removed (as they also say in old novels) after Hurricane Katrina erased his ancestral diggings in Biloxi.

He purchased a moderately historic cottage called Smith's Haven in Bonaparte's Olde Towne, near the kudzu-draped bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River and there installed himself, his dog Miss Scarlett (named for American fiction's most famous bitch) and a load of water-marked furnishings rescued from the wrack and ruin on the coast.

Behind his new-old dwelling's lichened brick walls, shielded from the street by azalea hedges and half a dozen red and white crape myrtles, he filled his days with gardening, with business — which consisted almost wholly in suing his former insurance company — and with his lifelong hobby, psychical research. In that department, everything looked hopeful. Bonaparte was richly supplied with ghosts. Spirits clumped about invisibly on wooden galleries, or whistled "Lorena" on winter evenings, or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

passed through walls where doors had once stood, or wept for lost lovers on moonlit nights, or frightened fornicators in the Confederate cemetery.

Unfortunately, they avoided Albion's cottage altogether. Even Miss Scarlett, who far surpassed him in the ESP department, after carefully examining the house did not find a single blank wall to growl and bristle at. On the other hand, for the first time in her pampered life, she chose to lie outdoors all day, making her nest under an azalea bush in the patio close by the garden gate, where she slept from dawn to dusk, rousing herself only to gulp meals and bark at the sixteen or seventeen vehicles that constituted Bonaparte's rush hour.

To Albion this seemed significant. *Something* made his new home unattractive to dogs and spirits. But what? He made the mistake of asking his housekeeper, an up-to-date black woman who'd returned to her Mississippi roots after thirty years in California in order (she said) to escape the traffic.

There was already a certain amount of tension between them. Placenta Wilson was the only cleaning lady he'd ever had who addressed him as "Baby," a term that seemed to put their relationship on an uncomfortably physical basis. (Placenta? Baby?)

Her attitude about spirits was equally disconcerting. Briefly removing from her lower lip the cigarette that usually hung there as if sutured, Placenta knocked some ash onto Albion's mother's gate-leg table, brushed it from the tabletop onto a saltwater-stained Persian carpet that couldn't get much more damaged anyway, and stated flatly that her son Antwon didn't believe in spirits.

"And what does *he* know about it?" snapped Albion.

"Well, he teaches computer science at Mather," she said, naming a small but extremely upscale private college in New England, as if that settled the matter. Then she bustled away about her duties, wiggling the round bottom that decorated her minimal frame like an olive on a toothpick.

"Utter irrelevancy," Albion muttered. What did computers have to do with spirits, anyway? As he liked to tell his new acquaintances in Bonaparte, he recognized that Placenta stood superior to most members of the cleaning-lady profession — he just wished she wouldn't keep reminding him of it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

He put the problem of his ghostless condition to a new acquaintance, Mrs. DeFlores, one afternoon when they were having tea in the back parlor of her mansion, Cottonwood. An eighty-two-year-old widow who'd married into the town's feudal aristocracy, she yielded to none in her attachment to the old ways, and often seemed to converse in the language of 1900, if not earlier. Thus she told Albion that he needed to consult a "darky" she knew, who was a medium.

This was the first time in half a century that Albion had heard anybody say darky without winking, and he found it particularly remarkable since he knew that Mrs. DeFlores had been born Mabel O'Dowd in Philadelphia, PA. Sipping his Earl Grey, he reflected briefly on the rumors that swirled around the lady — one, almost certainly false, that she kept a slave in an outbuilding; another, hopefully true, that Cottonwood possessed (or rather was possessed by) a veritable costume ball of ghosts. According to Albion's barber, they had names like Captain Jack and Mister Dick and Darlin' Sissy, and there was even a famous hunting dog of a few generations back called Powderhorn, who could be heard baying on moonlit nights.

If that was true, Mrs. DeFlores's recommendation of a medium might be worth following up. Albion had just opened his mouth to tell her so, when something began thumping violently inside the wall behind her chair. She murmured a word of apology, set her cup down, picked up a walking stick leaning against the wall and banged away vigorously, at the same time shouting, "Now captain, you stop that! It's safe — I've told you a million times, it's safe!"

The noise inside the wall stopped. She returned the stick to its place, and asked Albion if he'd care for a sugar cookie.

"I'd rather know who's in there," he told her. His voice trembled a little, not with fear but with the joy of a lepidopterist who spots a new kind of butterfly.

"Oh, just old Captain Jack. You know in 1863? When General Grant came through Bonaparte on his way to burn Jackson? Well, the captain was away with the Confederate army, so Darlin' Sissy, who was his wife and a lot smarter than anybody else in the family, including him, broke through the plaster and hid the family silver inside the wall. Then she had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her Negrahs turn the room into a bedroom and set up the bed so the headboard concealed the opening. When the Yanks arrived, she invited General Grant to spend the night, and he slept in that very bed, keeping the silver safer than anybody else could have!

"Then Captain Jack was captured at the Battle of Furnace Creek, after getting wounded in a place we won't discuss. Out of gratitude for Sissy's hospitality, General Grant paroled him and sent him home, and she put him in that same bed and nursed him until he died of complications. To comfort his male ego, she told him he was guarding the silver just by lying there. Unfortunately, after he died he kept on trying to guard it, even when the war was over and Darlin' Sissy had taken it out again.

"She was a great hostess, Mr. Merkel, especially after her post-war marriage to Mr. Dick, her brother-in-law who'd joined the Republicans and made lots of money, bless his heart. She needed all the silverware she could lay her hands on for her famous sit-down dinners for eighteen or twenty-four. Captain Jack to this day remains a man of few ideas but very tenacious, and raises a fuss whenever he happens to notice for the umpteenth time that the silver's gone. It's really hard dealing with such a stupid man, and I must say that death has not improved him."

Albion was enthralled. "This darky," he said, "the one who might be able to tell me why my house isn't haunted — would you give me her name?"

"Her name," said Mrs. D., "is Cyrene Foxx." (She pronounced it Sy-reeny.) "I'll give you her cell phone number before you leave. She is one of the old sort, Mr. Merkel, and you might consider employing her in place of Placenta, a fine and intelligent woman who is, unfortunately, very modern."

Albion nodded. He felt fairly sure that one of the old sort would not call him Baby. His hostess concluded the tea party with some words of warning.

"Cyrene worked for me a few years back, and she was an excellent housekeeper and made the most marvelous spoonbread. Yet I had to let her go. She's a physical medium, you see, and the way things flew around was *quite* distracting. Also, without meaning to do so, she stirred up the ghosts and made it hard to get a good night's rest, what with Powderhorn baying at the moon whether there was a moon or not, and the captain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hammering on the wall, and Mr. Dick calling for someone to muddle his toddy, and Darlin' Sissy (usually the most thoughtful of women) playing "Aura Lee" over and over and over on a piano I sold years ago because it was full of sour notes.

"I'm warning you about this, Mr. Merkel, so you won't complain if things get a little strange down in Smith's Haven. Cyrene is a true Christian and in Heaven will undoubtedly be a lot whiter than either one of us, but should you decide to employ her, you deserve to be told that having her around is not all gravy by any means."

INTERVIEWING CYRENE and ridding himself of Placenta took Albion less than a week. Placenta departed in anger after telling him, "What you want to work for you, Baby, is a *nigger*." She lifted her upper lip and almost snarled the forbidden word.

Which wasn't true at all. What he wanted — what he'd always wanted, he now realized — was a darky, specifically one attuned to the spirit world.

Cyrene certainly qualified for the dark part. Her skin had the almost ebonized finish so rare nowadays among African Americans, most of whom tend toward beige or *latte*. She was a small, leathery woman who dressed in surprisingly up-to-date pantsuits and went about her work with vigor. When she was ready to leave, Albion asked if she had detected any spiritual presences in Smith's Haven.

"No, Mr. Alby, I didn't. There is a force here, however."

"What sort of force?"

"I don't know, not yit, anyways. But it centers in the liberry."

"What library?" he asked, never having noticed one.

"Up there," she said, pointing at the living room ceiling. "I can just feel the weight of all them dusty old books, pushing down. Well, here's my daughter to ride me home," she added, as an enormous SUV drew up to the curb. "See you next Tuesday."

Albion knew that a respectable attic topped his house, for the A/C man had climbed up there to "check out them ducks and fillers." Aside from the existence of ducts and filters, however, the owner of the house knew nothing about what lay beyond the trapdoor in the hall ceiling.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Now, with some effort and the aid of a hooked pole, he pulled down a folding staircase and ascended slowly and cautiously until he reached the dusty planking of the attic floor. A good seven feet high in the center, the space would have been easy to traverse except for a clutter of retired furniture and the ducts, which coiled this way and that like foil-wrapped anacondas from their origin in a large metal box. A louvered ventilator at the back of the house admitted a brownish twilight.

Cautiously, Albion stepped over various sections of the anaconda until he spotted, tucked into the shadows beside the cobwebby brick chimney, an old armoire with a rusty scrolled key projecting from its door. To the accompaniment of falsetto complaints from the lock and hinges, he swung open the door and found inside four shelves of, yes, dusty old books.

He used his handkerchief to clean the seat and arms of a battered armchair that stood conveniently close, then sat down and began pulling the books one by one off the shelves. They were in every sense weighty stuff — old medical standards like Gray's *Anatomy* plus many works of skeptical and/or materialistic philosophers. Democritus, Hume, Voltaire, Marx, Spencer, Huxley, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Santayana — all were here. Besides the big guns of disbelief, Albion found books by lesser known figures — La Mettrie's *Man a Machine,* d'Holbach's *System of Nature,* Diderot's *Essays.* Flipping through the latter, he discovered that someone had heavily underlined the Frenchman's brutal view that "mankind will never be free until the last king has been strangled with the entrails of the last priest." In the margin the same somebody had penciled, "Yes!"

Oh, good Lord! thought Albion, his heart sinking.

No wonder ghosts shied away from Smith's Haven. Albion had bought and settled down in a house once occupied by an ardent and committed skeptic, and everybody knew how the delicate structure of ectoplasm shrivels before disbelief like a flower in a frost. But who could the malignant unbeliever have been?

On their next meeting, Mrs. DeFlores welcomed him again to the back parlor of Cottonwood, but instead of store-bought cookies fed him brick-like chunks of home-made banana bread that dropped into his stomach like sash weights.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bravely uttering little grunts of counterfeit pleasure, Albion put his hostess in the mood to supply him the information he needed. When he felt she'd been warmed up enough, he told her about the library, and asked who it might have belonged to. Maybe Smith, the original builder?

"No," she said thoughtfully. "In his day, Mr. Smith was a Presbyterian elder. Some quite respectable people are, you know. No, I would think the books belonged to Doctor Welch, who lived there just recently."

"Recently?" he asked doubtfully. It turned out that Mrs. DeFlores had her own notions of what constituted recentness.

"Yes. During the 1920s, I think. I used to hear stories about him in my younger days. When he first arrived in town, everybody was glad to see an enterprising young man take the place of old Dr. Thayer, who didn't believe in germs because he'd never seen one. For a while, Dr. Welch enjoyed quite a substantial practice. Then stories about his rather aggressive and defiant irreligiousness began to get around. One expects doctors to be skeptical, of course, it comes from thinking about bodies all the time — they start to believe the soul must be a secretion of the adrenal glands, or something. But the way he made an issue of the matter did him no good in this town. We *are* in the Bible Belt, after all. In time new doctors arrived that people trusted more, his practice declined, and in 1928 he shot himself."

"Shot himself?"

"Not with a gun. I suppose the correct phrase is shot himself *up*. He injected poison — hyoscine, I think. Do have another piece of banana bread, Mr. Merkel. It's so nice to find someone who appreciates my baking. Not everybody does."

That night Albion took two tablespoonfuls of Mylanta at bedtime instead of his usual one, but had peculiar dreams anyway. Nigel Bruce appeared (as Dr. Watson) but Basil Rathbone (as Holmes) kept calling him Welch. After some obscure chitchat, Holmes took out his famous hypodermic and injected himself with cocaine, remarking as he did so, "I have solved the riddle of the universe, Welch! God's secret is that He's a secretion." Welch burbled along in Watson's usual fawning manner, exclaiming "Pure brilliance, Holmes!" then morphed into a lapdog and began licking Albion's face.

He woke up. It was seven A.M., and Miss Scarlett wanted to be let out.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was time for her to bark at the morning rush hour, and go back to sleep.

After breakfast, Albion put on old clothes and returned to the attic. Searching for a clue as to how to proceed, he began slowly leafing through volume after volume of Dr. Welch's collection. Clearly, he'd been a man of forceful and uncompromising views. Scribbled in the margins of every book were his opinions, which were never less than emphatic: "Yes! No! Damned fool! Unscientific! Even that ass Benjamin Franklin knew better than this!" The skeptics themselves had rarely been skeptical enough to suit him: he meted out praise as sparingly as the cook at a Victorian workhouse doling out porridge. One of the few who gained his wholehearted approval was Democritus, whose icy view (in *De Rerum Natura*) that "nothing exists but atoms and the void" caused Welch to exclaim, *"Yes!!!!!!"*

It was all rather discouraging. When Cyrene showed up for work on Tuesday, Albion told her about his discoveries and asked whether she knew how to lift the cloud of unbelief that hung over the house. She said, well, they could try to contact Dr. Welch in the hereafter and ask him to help them lift the spell. Albion was dubious.

"He seems to have been pretty hard-nosed," he pointed out. "I'm not sure he'd want to help anybody."

"Oh, he wasn't all bad," she said, somehow flipping a bedspread so that it settled down in neat folds, like a military flag at sundown. "He was a mighty proud and scornful man, yet he doctored poor folks and wouldn't take no money for it. Black or white, didn't make him no never-mind. He looked after my mama when I was born."

Albion stared. If Mrs. DeFlores had her dates right and Dr. Welch had shot himself up in 1928, then Cyrene had to be at least 79 years old. Yet every day the woman did enough physical labor to weary a couple of dock workers.

"He delivered *you*?" asked Albion incredulously.

"Well, not *delivered*. Mama just kind of drapped me when nobody was expecting it. But he come by the house afterwards and saw to her health and mine. Oops."

Something had flitted across the room. Albion looked here and there in bewilderment — had a sparrow flown into the house? — then spotted a Haviland dinner plate balancing uneasily on the edge of his chest of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drawers. Cyrene retrieved it, dusted it, and put it back in its usual place on the sideboard in the dining room.

"Plates is the liveliest things, sometimes," she muttered, returning to the bedroom.

"Now, as to contacting Dr. Welch: I charges fifty dollars for a séance, and I can't be responsible for any breakage caused by sperrits. If that's acceptable, Mr. Alby, I think I got Sunday evening open. My daughter Altuna says it ain't religious to summon sperrits on a Sunday, but what does she know? She belongs to the Apostolic Fire-Baptized Church of God in Christ, and spite of the fancy name, none of those folks knows much. Oh, damn."

The plate had silently returned and now rested on Albion's pillow.

"That's *so* mischeevious," she said, frowning. "Now I know who's doing it. It's my little boy D'White David. I named him for General Eisenhower, hoping he'd grow up strong and brave, but he got whooping cough and passed in 1952 when he was only six. He been following after me ever since."

"He's not afraid to come into this house?"

"Not as long as I'm here," she said. "If I wasn't, he wouldn't come in here even if you offered him a Tootsie Roll."

Albion agreed to the Sunday evening séance. Then, because he felt uneasy around children, never having had any of his own, he went outside and sat in the patio and rubbed Miss Scarlett's belly until Cyrene left, with (he supposed) D'White David clinging invisibly to one leg of her pantsuit.

That weekend Albion had just finished watching *60 Minutes* when his bell chimed, and he found a triad of visitors standing on his porch.

"This here's Cousin Gordon," said Cyrene, leading the group indoors. "And this is Cousin Na'teesha. They works with me. And you don't have to worry bout the money, Mr. Alby — the price is the same, come one, come all."

Cousin Gordon was an enormous black man who wore workmen's attire, even though it was Sunday. "I takes care of the Methodist Church," he explained, his hand swallowing Albion's like a pelican ingesting a minnow.

Cousin Na'teesha was plump and fortyish, attired in a variety of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fluttery garments and carrying an alligator purse. She had a soft voice almost devoid of Bonaparte's traditional Peckerwood drawl, and shrewd, watchful eyes.

"Now the question is *where*," Cyrene muttered. She walked slowly through the living room, asking, "Y'awl smell anything in here? Like ether? I noticed it when I was cleaning."

She tested the dining room, the hallway, and the second bedroom that Albion was in process of converting into a study. In the end she returned to the living room and briskly ordered Cousin Gordon to move a small table beside the fireplace and bring in four chairs from the dining room. Albion felt cautiously impressed: the table was now precisely under the library in the attic. Cyrene ordered them to sit down and hold hands while she invoked a blessing.

"Some folks think we shouldn't do this on the Sabbath," she informed God in a confidential tone, "but I can't find nothing against it in Scripture." (That was intended, Albion supposed, to settle Altuna's hash.)

The lights were low. Na'teesha's hand felt small, cool and a little moist, while Gordon's was huge, calloused and dry. Cyrene muttered and gabbled to herself, most of the words unclear, though once she asked rather loudly, "How far to the other side?"

Maybe it was a signal, for Albion felt a pull at his left hand. He looked up at Gordon's mountainous form and noticed for the first time that he too was asleep or entranced, breathing softly and regularly through his mouth. Was this a whole family of mediums? If so, how did they split up the work?

As if answering his question, quite suddenly a woman's voice began to emerge from Gordon's lips.

"This here is Aunt Sally," the voice announced in the cracked tones of age. "Is that you, Natty? Oh, and there's Cyrene, too. Who's the white fella? I once knew everybody round Boney Part, but he's a new one on me. How's the weather down by y'awl?"

"Kind of rainy," said Na'teesha. "How is it where you at?"

"Very bright," said Aunt Sally. "Very, very bright."

"That's nice. I guess you're over the clouds there, so you get lots of light from the sun."

"Not from the sun," said Aunt Sally. "Our light comes from the Son."

"Praise God!" exclaimed Na'teesha. "Now, Honey, much as I'd love

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to visit with you a while, this gentleman is paying fifty dollars to contact a certain person name of Welch used to live in Smith's Haven."

"There I can't help you," said Aunt Sally. "I remember Dr. Welch a little bit, but he ain't up here with us. Come back when you got more time to chat, okay, Na'teesha?"

The next twenty minutes were largely wasted, as a parade of unwanted spirits took the stage. A medieval archer babbled in Middle English; an Irish servant girl who'd died of typhoid in nineteenth-century New York gave thanks she'd never again have to "scrub them damn front steps"; a repentant Storyville whore praised her Redeemer; a U-boat crewman denounced *die gottverdammte Engländer* who'd killed him with a depth charge in 1943.

One by one Na'teesha dismissed these annoying wraiths, repeating over and over that Dr. Welch, of Bonaparte, Mississippi, was the only person wanted. And at last, with a suddenness that made Albion jump, a precise and cutting baritone emerged from Gordon's lips.

"Why are you people practicing your superstitious folly in my house?" it demanded.

Na'teesha responded, "Will you identify yourself, please?"

"Peter Paul Welch, M.D. *Doctor* Peter Paul Welch," he added, in case those present were too dense to understand the M.D. "May I ask again what the devil you're doing in my surgery?"

"You practiced medicine in this room?"

"Madam, I practice medicine here *every day*. And I don't rent out space for strangers to put on absurd mummeries. Belle, show these intruders out."

"Doctor Welch, do you recognize the lady seated at your left?"

Silence followed. Then: "She seems...oddly familiar."

"Her name is Cyrene Foxx, formerly Cyrene Brown."

"That's quite absurd. Cyrene Brown is an infant."

"No, Doctor Welch. She's eighty years old."

"Are you insane?"

"You're dead, Doctor Welch. You died eighty years ago. You're a ghost."

Surprisingly, Welch's tone softened. "My dear woman, I must apologize for my earlier asperity. I see now why you're in my surgery. I suppose

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

worried family members brought you here. However, you should know that I'm a general practitioner, so I can't treat your mental problems. You need to see an alienist. Unfortunately, this benighted town doesn't possess one, even though most of the people are crazy. Try Charity Hospital in New Orleans."

Albion bestirred himself. "But she's right," he protested. "You *are* a ghost."

"Two cases of lunacy on the same day!" exclaimed Dr. Welch. "I wonder if it's catching. Could it be some sort of toxin? Hm. Have either of you eaten any moldy rye bread lately? Open your mouth and say *ah*. Take off your shirt, sir — I'll need to palpate your abdomen. Are you, by any chance, seeing double? This is turning out to be an uncommonly interesting day."

Albion was getting angry, something that his peaceable temperament seldom allowed him to do. But he found Dr. Welch's impenetrable wrong-headedness hard to take. "*YOU...ARE...A...GHOST!*" he almost shouted.

"Now, now, now. We can't have any violence. You're clearly in need of a sedative. Belle, my dear, ask Jim to stop weeding the garden and give me a hand. I need him to hold somebody down."

But they never got to meet Jim, for the two mediums had had enough. After some mumbling and heavy breathing, Gordon awoke from his trance. Shortly afterward Cyrene came to as well with a burp that caused her to beg everyone's pardon. While Albion turned up the lights and served coffee, she and Gordon listened closely to Na'teesha's account of what had gone on while they were "under."

Cyrene thought that "Jim" might be Jim Joe Johnston, a notorious black gigolo of a few generations back, who'd worked at gardening whenever the supply of women willing to support him temporarily gave out. "Belle" was a poser. Maybe a long-forgotten nurse? "The doctor, I don't think he had him a wife. Mama said he'd been disappointed in love, being left at the altar by some gal had a fit of common sense just before it was too late."

Albion still hadn't gotten over the impact of Dr. Welch's antipathetic personality. "Can you imagine a man who's been dead for eighty years insisting that he's still alive?" he demanded.

Cyrene agreed that eighty years was a long time to go on fooling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

yourself. "But you know, Mr. Alby, ghosts do tend to cling to the past, being kind of leftovers themselves."

"Look at little D'White," Na'teesha offered. "He won't never move on and enter the Light until Cyrene passes over and takes him by the hand."

"He always was a clingy child," Cyrene agreed.

"And," said Gordon, speaking for a change in his own voice, which resembled a tuba solo, "look at all them sperrits been running round Cottonwood for a hundred and some odd years. Miz Sissy stays on because she was a sociable climber, and that was where she clumb the highest. Mr. Dick and Captain Jack stays around for the same reason dogs follow bitches. Why old Powderhorn stays, I'm not sure. Ain't no *real* bitches there I know of."

"It was good coon hunting round Cottonwood at one time," said Cyrene. "Before they built that new condo development out back, and the Wal-Mart moved in."

As the triad was leaving, Cyrene — carefully folding Albion's check — gave him a last bit of counsel.

"I'm afraid you got you a problem, Mr. Alby," she said. "You gonna have a hard time getting Doctor Welch to see sense and move along. He got a good side, like I told you, but at bottom he's a strong man and he's a wrong man, and that's a bad combination. Strong and wrong," she repeated, shaking her head. "That's tough to deal with."

ALBION WAS STILL brooding over the results of the séance when he had a telephone call from a neighbor. Placenta had applied for a cleaning job to Mrs. Lucy Jeter, who lived down the street, and Mrs. Jeter was checking her references. He had no problem saying that she was a good worker and honest and trustworthy. Since Mrs. J didn't ask about excessive familiarity or modernity, he didn't bring up the negatives.

A few days later he saw Placenta on the street, and she hailed him like an old friend. "Baby, that was *so* good of you, telling Lucy all those nice things about me," she said warmly. "Especially after we had that little run-in between us."

After that, they exchanged chummy greetings whenever their paths

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

happened to cross. One day she told him her son Antwon was coming for a visit and asked if she could bring him by. ("And I'll leave the smokes at home," she promised.) Albion had no particular urge to meet a computer nerd who, he felt, was likely to be as big a bore as such people usually were. But in line with his basic essential laziness, he said, "Certainly," because that was easier than saying, "No."

Thus, one evening his doorbell chimed again, and he greeted the duo of Placenta and Antwon Wilson. Antwon was thirtyish, as skinny as his mother but lighter in hue, and while she was neatly attired in skirt and blouse, he dressed like a true academic sloven. A triangle of torn T-shirt showed beneath his prominent Adam's apple, and a duo of unmatched socks peeped between the cuffs of his baggy tweeds and his battered L.L. Bean loafers.

"I knew a guy named Merkel in Providence," was Antwon's opener. "He was a Communist and I used to sleep with his sister. Would they be relatives of yours?"

This did nothing to get things off to a good start. After denying any relationship whatever with the Rhode Island Red and his sluttish sister, Albion served wine, crackers, and cheese — a domestic Brie, the best available in Bonaparte. Antwon ate it in big, expensive gulps, commenting as he did so that he never bothered to taste what he was eating because "it's just fuel."

Searching rather desperately for a topic of conversation, Albion mentioned that he'd discovered the library of a doctor previously in residence at Smith's Haven. This brought a double-barreled putdown from Antwon, first of Dr. Welch ("Oh, an old horse and buggy doc, eh?"), and then of books in general.

"Can't see why anybody reads 'em any more. I don't. Good Lord, it's like communicating by snail mail."

Forced to defend his obnoxious ghost against his equally obnoxious guest, Albion pointed out that opportunities to get on the internet had been rather limited in 1928, when the doctor died. Antwon conceded the point: "Good Lord, *1928*. That was back in the Nixon Administration, wasn't it?"

Placenta, who was no fool, saw how things were going and hastily brought up Albion's family history, of which he was inordinately proud.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

With little cries of interest and delight, she nudged him into admitting that the Merkels had long been pillars of the Gulf Coast — back when there *was* a Gulf Coast, that is. He could have discoursed very happily for a couple of hours on his exact place in the vast web of southern cousinage, except that Antwon's face had taken on a zombielike thousand-yard stare. So, sighing inwardly, Albion did his duty as a host and asked about the Wilson family tree.

It turned out to be complex. Like most southern families, the Wilsons counted both black and white relations. Placenta claimed DeFlores blood — from Captain Jack the Confederate, not from Mr. Dick the Scalawag, who unlike his brother had been a deadly foe of interracial coupling. She referred to the current Mrs. DeFlores as "the Yank." Placenta's own Mama, Felice, had been the result of further mixing. After her birth, Placenta's grammaw Isobel had been visited by the Klan demanding the name of the father, which she refused to give, even under threat of death.

At this point, noting that Antwon was again imitating a zombie, Placenta broke off her genealogical lecture.

"You don't like to hear this kind of stuff, do you, Baby?" she asked, at last bestowing the term where it was appropriate.

He shook his head. "There's a lot I don't know about where we came from. And there's a lot I don't want to know."

This sentiment depressed Albion more than anything else the young man had said. How could anybody be uninterested in his origins? After the Wilsons left, he was stacking cups and plates in the dishwasher when the phone rang. It was Mrs. DeFlores, inviting him for tea and banana bread. Of course he accepted, reminding himself to buy another blue flask of Mylanta at the Wal-Mart on his way to Cottonwood.

Making chitchat, "the Yank" then asked him in her best gracious-lady voice what he'd been up to lately.

"Getting a look at the future," he said somberly, thinking of Antwon.

"Oh, so now it's crystal balls?" she chortled. "My, you do get around. What did you see in the future, Mr. Merkel?"

"A blank page," he answered. "A brick wall."

All night he wrestled with the Dr. Welch problem, but without reaching any useful conclusions. He needed an exorcist, yet doubted that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

even the Jesuits in the movie could accomplish much in this case. Expelling Beelzebub from Georgetown was one thing. How would they get rid of a ghost who denied even being a ghost?

For lack of alternatives he returned to the attic and the armoire. He'd already gone through every book but one, the last volume on the lowest shelf, whose technical subject and off-putting title (*Parasitic Worms*) had caused him to avoid it. Picking it up now, he noticed at once that it felt too light. He opened it and discovered that the book had been carefully hollowed out and turned into a hiding place for three string-tied bundles of fading letters.

Feeling the kind of excitement that long ago had made Peeping Tom put his eye to a crack in his shutter, Albion untied the first bundle. The top letter, postmarked Aug. 16, 1923, was on faded blue stationery embossed with the name of Miss Juliette Grinder in fancy script.

My Darlingest Poo-poo, it began. *A flapper you call me, in your darling pompous way! Did anyone ever tell you you're a* young *fuddy-duddy*? *Yes dear Heart I am a flapper, even if not "five foot two, eyes of blue" as in that song you hate so much. But I am as loyal and true to you as the other Juliette was to what's-his-name in that play you made me read. I dream every single night of you — dreams that leave me faint yet tingling with an ardent warmth that previously I had only read about in books by French authors.*

This kind of thing went on for quite a while. The letter was signed *For Ever and Ever, Your Joo-joo.*

This hinted at a Peter Paul Welch, M.D., of whom Albion had known nothing. Hands trembling, he unfolded letter after letter. The romance had begun when Dr. Welch was in his final year at Tulane Medical School. *Papa says you must have your Degree and a Situation as well, before we can be wed. Well, hurry on and get the dam' degree then! I can't wait forever and neither can you, if I can judge by the tendency of your trousers to form a tent when we are necking together! (Aren't I a bad girl, though?) And don't worry so much about money, my dear one. Papa is a mean man in some ways, yet I have been wrapping him around my finger since I was a little girl, and I know he will help us out.*

Apparently she was right, for Welch's graduation had been followed by the purchase of a small but lucrative practice in Bonaparte from an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

elderly doctor who was retiring. (Presumably the one who'd never seen a germ.) Welch took up his duties, but the wedding was again put off. Joo-joo's Papa wanted to be sure his prospective son-in-law would make a success of his chosen career, and packed off his daughter to Europe on the SS *Carnatic* for a luxurious tour to delay things a while longer.

The result was disaster. The last letter was typewritten on legal letterhead and signed in a bold, slashing hand. The writer was Julie's Papa, and the letterhead proclaimed him to be Alfred M. Grinder, Attorney-at-Law.

"I had thought, Welch, that my generosity in loaning you the money to obtain a practice might open the way to a marriage between yourself and my daughter. Needless to say, the infamous conduct of which you stand accused has rendered that forever impossible. My daughter, sir, will not enter a bed only just vacated by a Negress — worse, a Negress whose bastard brat you are accused of siring. Who do you think you are, young man — Thomas Jefferson?"

Much more followed, and it was no kinder than the opening. Grinder made threats of exposure and legal action and even a possible lynching. "The laws against miscegenation are not the only thing you have to fear, though the mere accusation would ruin you professionally. Good old fashioned frontier justice has not died out in the community where you reside. Suppose you were publicly accused of being a traitor to your race, what might happen to you then? Reflect upon it, Welch! *I want my money back!* And I intend to receive it, together with such interest as I may choose to demand of you. You will, sir, pay for your conduct — pay through the nose."

My ducats and my daughter, thought Albion. *Who said that, anyway? Shylock?*

Exactly at this moment — sitting in the brown shadows of the attic, inhaling the dust of a bygone scandal — two names he'd recently heard popped out of nowhere into his mind, fused and became one. Belle! Isobel! Placenta's mother Felice had been Welch's daughter by his black housekeeper, Isobel (alias Belle) Wilson!

The second séance held at Smith's Haven was not quite a duplicate of the first. Albion had communicated with Placenta, and the information

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he could now give her about her own ancestry was enough to insure that she would be present.

Antwon was another matter. "I'll see if I can twist his arm," was the best she could promise. The twisting must have succeeded, for the two Wilsons — one looking determined, the other sullen — turned up that Sunday evening in time for the festivities.

Cyrene greeted them with marked reserve. Apparently Antwon had done no better job of endearing himself to black Bonapartians than white. Albion knew that Placenta wasn't too popular either, on account of her California airs. (Once in his presence Cyrene had referred to her as "the Sunset Stripper.")

A larger table was needed, so this time they sat in the dining room, Cyrene remarking that "It ain't Ground Zero, but it'll have to do." Antwon was placed between his mother and Na'teesha, Albion as before between Na'teesha and Gordon, while Cyrene clasped hands with Gordon and the Sunset Stripper.

As the preparations went forward, Antwon's expression seemed to be progressing from sullen to rebellious. But Gordon gave him a grim, lowering glance and the teacher of computer science at least held his peace.

As before, lesser spirits had to have their say. Aunt Sally revealed that the Holy Trinity was as big a mystery to the dead as it was to the living. A Swiss ski instructor who'd just perished in an avalanche uttered a string of incoherent syllables from a mouth still full of snow and Germanic consonants. Either Edith Piaf or somebody who sounded remarkably like her sang a few bars of *Non, je ne regrette rien.* A Jacobean roisterer made the room tremble as he roared out denunciations of the Puritans as "slubberdegullion druggels," whatever in the world *that* meant.

As before, Na'teesha disposed of these intruders briefly and decisively, until Dr. Welch's cold tones cut through the babble.

"You two not in straitjackets yet?" he demanded. "What can the authorities be thinking of?"

Na'teesha nodded significantly to Albion, who cleared his throat and nervously began the dialogue. "Dr. Welch," he said, "I assume you remember Belle Wilson?"

This produced so long a silence that Albion was afraid that the line to the other side might have, so to speak, gone dead.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes," said Dr. Welch finally.

"Allow me to introduce you to Placenta, her granddaughter, and Antwon, her great-grandson. *Your* granddaughter and *your* great-grandson."

"My...my what?"

"I believe," said Albion, with a coolness he was far from feeling, "that you understand me perfectly well. I trust you won't compel me to read to this company from Julie Grinder's letters, nor from that particularly nasty letter written by a certain attorney-at-law — "

"No!" shouted the spirit. "Have you no shame?"

"Have *you* no shame? When in 1928 Klansmen visited Isobel Wilson — your Belle — to discover the name of her child's father, she refused to hand you over to them, even though they threatened her life. But others, including your white fiancée's rather dreadful Papa, had learned the secret, I suspect from Dick DeFlores, who had a nose for such things. Was that when you decided to take the easy way out, leaving a poor black woman to raise your daughter alone?"

Silence again. But Albion, after a lifetime of being nice, had finally located the anger button in his psyche, and pressed it.

"Speak up, man!" he commanded. "Speak up!"

"Yes," said Dr. Welch. From the changed tone, Albion could almost feel the spirit metaphorically squaring his shoulders.

"That was what I did. I admit it. My whole life had suddenly come apart and I acted out of fear for myself, and no thought for her. I thought death meant annihilation. I thought I'd never be called to account. I thought I'd escape from danger and shame into the void — into nothingness. Well, I was...I was...I was...*wrong*."

At this crucial admission, Na'teesha, Placenta and Albion all exhaled. But the sigh of relief was interrupted when Antwon jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over backward.

"You son of a bitch!" he shouted. "You lousy pimp! You swine! You scum!"

"Now, Baby," said Placenta, tugging at his sleeve. "It was all a long time ago."

Baby was having none of that. For a thirty-year-old man, Antwon managed to throw a tantrum that might have won respect from an ill-natured two-year-old. His language wasn't as inventive as the Jacobean roisterer's,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but he did his best with the banal four-and-five-letter invective of modern times. Placenta kept trying to stop the flow of denunciation, but Albion preferred to let it run, feeling that it was doing Dr. Welch less harm than he deserved.

Finally Antwon burst into tears, probably tears of rage, and ran from Smith's Haven with Placenta in his wake. Na'teesha, having sat open-mouthed during the scene, turned to Albion and said, "I never thought little old Numb Nuts had it in him."

By this time the mediums were waking, stretching, returning to the world that is sometimes termed real. Feeling that something calming was in order, Albion opened a bottle of Cabernet that he particularly treasured because it had survived Katrina, and poured small glasses all around. When the events of the evening had been retold and digested, Cyrene suggested they bow their heads, join hands, and offer a prayer for the repose of Dr. Welch's soul.

"He had good in him, you know," she said, almost apologetically. "He just never let it come out enough, is all."

As the guests were leaving, she hung back for a moment and whispered to Albion, "His soul is finally in flight, I hope *toward* his Redeemer. Your house is clean now, Mr. Alby, I mean spirit-wise. Otherwise it needs a good dusting. See you on Tuesday."

WITH THE DEPARTURE of Dr. Welch's tormented and denying spirit, other and gentler ghosts gradually began to show up, probably drawn by Cyrene's mediumistic powers.

That perpetual six-year-old D'White David was a thoroughly exasperating brat. Albion had to lock up his mother's good china — presumably D'White could pass through the walls of the china cabinet, but he couldn't get the plates and cups out — and keep buying new Wal-Mart dishware to eat from, as D'White broke one set after another.

Other spirits were much more agreeable. From time to time around midnight Albion's mother appeared in his bedroom to check and make sure he was properly tucked in. His father was sometimes to be seen gazing longingly at the wine rack, for spirits had been his problem long before he became one. A mysterious Blue Lady took to floating down the hall; she resembled the only woman Albion had ever seriously considered

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

marrying — considered so seriously and long that she married somebody else, in fact three somebody elses in succession, before dying. But the image was faint, the ID dubious, and the *Journal of Psychical Research* rejected an article he did on her as "unproven."

Most mournful of all the ghosts was a mysterious flickering blue creature that Mrs. DeFlores positively identified as Powderhorn. He frequently trotted over from Cottonwood (or whatever gait dead dogs use to go visiting), favoring autumn nights when the dry leaves rustled like passing spirits and the huge brilliant harvest moon sucked the starlight out of the sky.

Then, with Miss Scarlett watching him, fur bristling on her nape, he sat and pointed his muzzle upward and in long, moaning, sobbing howls expressed his yearning for the life of the flesh that was, sadly, forever beyond his reach. Eternity, he seemed to be telling Albion, wasn't all gravy either.

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

PLEASE DO NOT COUNT ON THE POST OFFICE TO FORWARD YOUR ISSUES AFTER YOU MOVE. IF YOU ARE PLANNING A CHANGE OF ADDRESS, PLEASE NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE, AND ALLOW SIX WEEKS FOR THE CHANGE TO BECOME EFFECTIVE. BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD AND NEW ADDRESS, INCLUDING THE ZIP CODES. PRINT CLEARLY AND, IF POSSIBLE, ATTACH AN OLD MAILING LABEL.

OR USE OUR HANDY CHANGE OF ADDRESS FORM ONLINE AT **www.fandsf.com**

OLD ADDRESS
(attach label here if available)

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

NEW ADDRESS

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE,
Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

BLOODY HELL ON LAKE NEUCHÂTEL

ONCE UPON a time there was a little boy who dreamed of being on a film-festival jury...naw, not really. When I was a kid I dreamed about the usual stuff, looting and pillaging and so on, but once I reached my majority and got into movies, I'd watch the juries at Cannes and think how cool it would be to sit on one. Well, as it happens, this past summer I finally got my chance. The Neuchâtel International Fantastic Film Festival (NIFFF) isn't Cannes, but it's a pretty classy event. They put the jury up in a five-star hotel (my room came equipped with a Mite scooter that I occasionally rode around the halls late at night like little Danny in *The Shining*) and gave us expensive Swiss watches as door prizes, and Neuchâtel is a lovely medieval town on a gorgeous lake with lots of spectacular venues for the cocktail parties (of which there were many), including a castle. The festival was light on actors, but there were a number of interesting directors in attendance: Jaume Balagueró (*[Rec]*); George Romero (you know); Lamberto Bava and Jess Franco, both responsible for dozens of Italian giallo, and many more. So that part of the jury experience lived up to expectations. The rest of it, the actual judging part of things...not so much.

There were twelve films in competition at the NIFFF, entries from Korea, Japan, Norway, Sweden, France, Macedonia, the U.S.A. and elsewhere. Twelve films, you'd think, would be a snap to watch over four days, but it turned out to be fairly arduous, because our schedules were so packed and also because the majority of the movies were horror films and having to sit

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through munching and bleeding and splattering for approximately seven hours a day took a toll on one's sensibilities. The jury consisted of myself and three directors: Joe Dante (*Gremlins*; *The Howling*), Xavier Gens (*Hitman*, *Frontiers*), and Jens Lien (*The Bothersome Man*). Neil Marshall (*The Descent*) was supposed to participate, but was forced to withdraw due to an emergency. From my perspective, about half the films were eliminated early on, beginning with the crushingly awful slasher film *Manhunt*, a retelling of *Deliverance* wherein two young couples are hunted and horribly slaughtered by Norwegian rednecks. This movie received a good deal of hype, mainly because it was the first such picture produced in Norway and the director was only twenty-five...doubtless the explanation for the film's lack of depth and originality.

Also off the list in the early going were George Romero's *Diary of the Dead* (too much "been there, done that" for my tastes) and Gregg Bishop's *Dance of the Dead*, another zombie film. Though the latter had a few nice touches and a leading lady (Greyson Chadwick) with real star potential, its mix of Romero-esque grue, *Prom Night*, and cheap yucks ultimately came to nothing. Another easy scratch was Takashi Miike's Spaghetti western with Japanese gunslingers, *Sukiyaki Western Django*. Featuring Quentin Tarantino in a minor yet crucial role (always a bad sign), the movie is a parody of a genre that has already parodied itself to better effect, and watching it to the end was a chore. Gunnar B. Gudmundsson's *Astrópía*, the story of a beautiful blond airhead who finds work at a geek video store when her boyfriend is sent to prison, opens promisingly, but then falls flat when our heroine finds both herself and true love through role-playing — the role-playing scenes (done as live-action fantasy sequences in ridiculous costumed regalia) may remind many of just how dull their lives were in younger years. In-ho Yun's *The Devil's Game* tells of a young man lured into a sucker bet by a dying old billionaire. The stakes? If he loses, he switches bodies with the septuagenarian. The film goes on far too long and has perhaps the most confusing ending in cinematic history. I'm still unclear as to its resolution.

Among the contenders, Milcho Manchevski's *Shadows*, a ghost story set in modern-day Macedonia, also was too long (a half-hour at least) and suffered from its director's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

apparent obsession with his busty leading lady — he seemed to be looking for opportunities to have her remove her blouse. Depending on your point of view, this tendency either got in the way of the narrative, or else the narrative interfered with the softcore porn. One way or the other, if you took out the extraneous material, there would probably be a decent (or indecent) movie left over. *The Cottage* is a brisk horror comedy reminiscent of early Peter Jackson by British director Paul Andrew Williams. It relates the misadventures of two bungling kidnappers (Andy Serkis and Reece Shearsmith), who repair to a rural cottage with their blond victim. The ensuing mayhem is carried out with humor and energy, but the film wasn't sufficiently different from its many antecedents to win over the jury. *Eskalofrío*, Isidro Ortiz's tale about a feral child, beautifully shot amid the gloomy forests of the Spanish Pyrenees, began well and appeared to be going somewhere new, but fell prey to the Hollywood penchant for laying on climax after climax after climax. *Tokyo!*, a trilogy of short films about that city, featured good but slight work in the surrealist vein by Joonho Bong and Michel Gondry, and was centered by an amazing piece of film by Leos Carax entitled "Merde." It tells of an eccentric, Dada-style terrorist, a man named Merde, who lives in the Tokyo sewers, his crimes, his trial, and eventual end. As the title character, Denis Lavant creates a portrait that's hard to forget.

The winner of the jury prize was *Sleep Dealer*, a science fiction movie about the effects of globalization, by a young Mexican-American director, Alex Rivera, here making his feature debut. "Five minutes from now," as Rivera puts it, a militarized barrier has been built along the Mexican border with the United States, effectively stopping all immigration, illegal and otherwise. To satisfy their need for cost-effective labor, U.S.-based companies hire third-worlders to operate machinery in twelve-hour shifts, shipping their consciousnesses across the border via a sort of virtual reality that requires the implantation of nodes in one's arms, neck, and back. This enables them to work themselves to death without ever entering the States — the nodes drain them of their vital energies and power surges frequently fry their brains. It's cheap labor with no social responsibility: the American Dream.

Memo (Luis Fernando Peña) is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a young hacker trapped on his family's *milpa* (corn plantation) near Oaxaca, longing to be anywhere else. Because a U.S. corporation has dammed their river, the family is forced to buy water at exorbitant prices under the scrutiny of armed guards. One night Memo hacks into a security transmission, and is detected and mistakenly identified as an "aqua-terrorist." A robot plane (operated by a node-wearing American soldier of Mexican descent) is deployed and attacks their house and kills Memo's father. To support the family, Memo travels to Tijuana, now a sprawling, festering megalopolis, gets a black market node job, and begins working for a sleep dealer, an illegal job shop. Along the way he becomes involved with Luz (Leonor Varela), a young woman who sells her node-transmitted memories online. She begins to use his experiences and their relationship as fodder, selling the story, along with his feelings of culpability and remorse...to one very interested customer in particular.

Alex Rivera is going to be a big deal someday, that much is clear. His movie is hugely imaginative, both funny and tragic, and his future is utterly believable. Limited by a minuscule budget, however, his special FX were (to be kind) not up to par, and his ending was much too facile. *Sleep Dealer* is a very enjoyable picture, one destined for cult status among science fiction fans, and not in the least undeserving of awards; but it was not the best film in the competition at NIFFF. That honor belongs to an elegant Swedish vampire movie *Let the Right One In*, directed by Tomas Alfredson and adapted for the screen by John Ajvide Lindqvist from his best-selling novel. Set in 1980s Sweden, in and around a drab apartment complex in a midsize town, the film focuses upon the relationship between a twelve-year-old boy and a girl of approximately the same age who moves into the apartment next door.

Quiet, poetic, sincere, and sweet are not words normally used to describe a vampire picture, but this — as Alfredson's nuanced and layered direction details — is that rarest of animals, an *original* vampire picture. It's also a love story, a coming-of-age story, and a discourse on marginality and exclusion leavened with touches of black humor. Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant) is neglected by his single mom and bullied at school. He keeps a notebook of the things he'd like to do to his tormentors and is obsessed with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

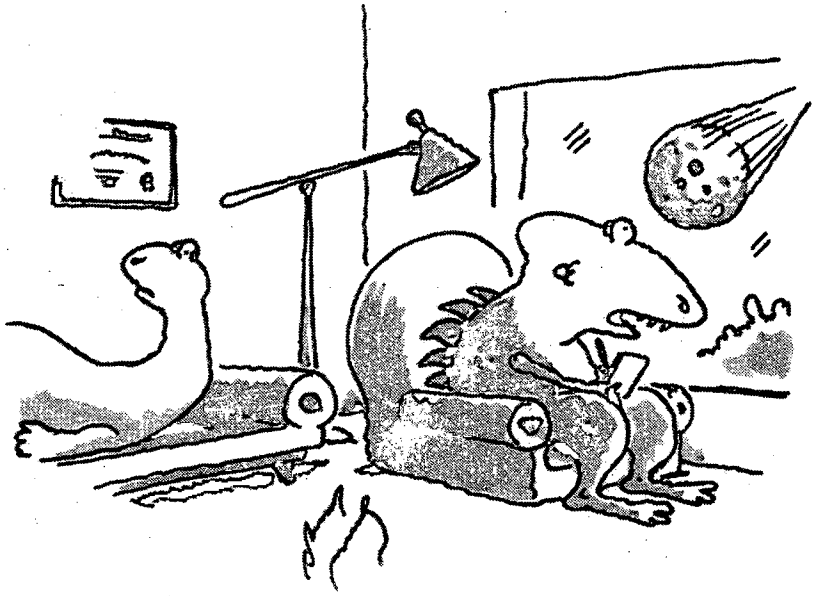
newspaper articles on violent crimes. In the first scene, we see him — a blond, almost albino child standing in his bedroom in his underwear, thrusting a knife at the air and saying, "Squeal like a pig!" He keeps bumping into Eli (Lina Leandersson) outside their building at night and eventually she befriends him, urging him to strike back hard at the bullies. Eli is, of course, the vampire of the piece, "parented" by the bumbling Håkan, a middle-aged man who spends his nights collecting the blood that sustains her (though it is unstated, it becomes apparent that he does this in order to prevent the creation of new vampires). He poisons his victims with halthion, hangs them upside down in a snowy park, slashes their throats, and drains the blood into a jerry can. It's a testament to Alfredson's skill that he manages to make this all seem like drudgery, not Grand Guignol, and thus sustains our sympathy for the killer and his ward.

More typical cinematic violence occurs, to be sure, when Eli is forced to seek blood on her own; but these sequences are inventive and wonderfully staged, and contrast so greatly with the film's icy cinematography and deliberate, moody pacing, that when they arrive they impact the audience with a dreamlike intensity. The violence is further ameliorated by the trust and sweetness of the developing relationship between Oskar and Eli. They become each other's fantasy — I'm not speaking of vampire and potential victim, but of the soul mate one improbably finds next door. The two leads give stunning performances. The slow unspooling of the movie allows them to render their characters with a bright specificity — the sultry, watchful Lina and the slyly optimistic Oskar — and this in turn lends their unconsummated, almost otherworldy love a poignant reality. They're creepy and violent, yet compelling in their vulnerability. That's why I was flabbergasted when one member of our jury said he found the children "inexpressive," and another said there was something wrong with the pacing. I was so taken aback, I don't think I managed a suitable response and I blame myself for not being more on the ball and putting up a better fight. I'm not sure what they wanted to see — perhaps they missed the jump cuts and histrionics that certainly will attend the American remake, due out in 2010.

The title, *Let the Right One In*, is lifted from a Morrissey song and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

refers to the myth that vampires can only enter a home into which they have been invited. It presages a key scene in the picture, and it might also be seen as an admonition to those who sat in judgment: Let the right one *win*. Yet I don't suppose I should feel too badly for Alfredson and Lindqvist. *Let the Right One In* has already won the award for best narrative feature at the prestigious Tribeca Film Festival, a remarkable achievement for a genre film, and it has been awarded major prizes at festivals in Denmark, Sweden, and Edinburgh. Its failure to win at the NIFFF stands less as a comment on the filmmakers and their brilliant movie than on the shabby performance of the jury.



"It looks like our time is up."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

John Langan lives near New Paltz, New York, with his wife and son. His first novel, House of Windows, *is slated for publication next Spring. Meantime, his collection of stories,* Mr. Gaunt and Other Uneasy Encounters, *is due soon. We're told that volume includes a previously unpublished story, but that is not the tale we bring you now. Instead, we are reprinting Mr. Langan's contribution to* The Living Dead, *an anthology assembled by our own Assistant Editor, John Joseph Adams. That book was originally going to consist entirely of reprints, but our schedule didn't allow us to publish this story before the book came out.*

Got all that? Well, no matter. What matters is that you've got before you a fine new tale of horror from the pen of John Langan. Enjoy.

How the Day Runs Down

By John Langan

(THE STAGE DARK WITH the almost-blue light of the late, late night, when you've been up well past the third ranks of late-night talk shows, into the land of the infomercial, the late show movies whose soundtrack is out of sync with its characters' mouths and which may break for commercial without regard for the action on the screen, the rebroadcast of the news you couldn't bear to watch the first time. It is possible — just — to discern rows of smallish, rectangular shapes running across the stage, as well as the bulk of a more substantial, though irregular, shape to the rear. The sky is dark: no moon, no stars.

(When the STAGE MANAGER snaps on his flashlight — a large one whose bright beam he sweeps back and forth over the audience once, twice, three times — the effect of the sudden light, the twirl of shadows around the theater, is emphasized by brushes rushing over drums, which give the sound of leaves, and a rainstick, which conjures the image of bones clicking against one another more than it does rain.

(Having surveyed the audience to his apparent satisfaction, the Stage

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Manager trains his light closer to home. This allows the audience to see the rows of tombstones that stretch the width of the stage, two deep in most places, three in a couple. Even from his quick inspection of them, it is clear that these are old tombstones, most of them chipped, worn smooth. The Stage Manager spares a moment for the gnarled shape behind the tombstones, a squat willow, before positioning the flashlight on the ground to his left, bottom down, so that its white light draws a cone in the air. He settles himself down beside it, his back leaning for and finding a tombstone, his legs gradually crossing in front of him.

(It has to be said, even with the light shining right beside him, the Stage Manager is not easy to see. A reasonable guess would locate him somewhere in his late forties, but estimates a decade to either side would not be unreasonable. His eyes are deep set, sheltered under heavy brows and the bill of the worn baseball cap on his head. His nose is thick, and may have been broken in some distant confrontation; the shadows from the light spilling across his face make it difficult to decide if his broad upper lip sports a mustache; although his solid chin is clear of any hair. His ethnicity is uncertain; he could put in an appearance at most audience members' family reunions as a cousin twice-removed and not look out of place. He is dressed warmly, for late fall, in a bomber jacket, flannel shirt, jeans, and heavy boots.)

Stage Manager: Zombies. As with most things in life, the reality, when compared to the high-tech, Hollywood gloss of the movies, comes as something of a surprise. For one thing, there's the smell, a stench that combines all the worst elements of raw sewage and rotted meat, together with the faint tang of formaldehyde. Folks used to think that last was from the funeral homes — whatever they'd used to pickle dear Aunt Myrtle — but as it turned out, this wasn't the case. It's just part of the smell they bring with them. Some people — scientists, doctors — have speculated that it's the particular odor of whatever is causing the dead to rise up and stagger around; although I gather other scientists and doctors have disagreed with that theory. But you don't have to understand the chemistry of it to know that it's theirs.

For another thing, when it comes to zombies, no one anticipated how persistent the damned things would be. You shoot them in the chest, they keep on coming. You shoot them in the leg — hell, you blow their leg clean

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

off with your shotgun at point-blank range, they fall on their side, flop around for a minute or two, then figure out how to get themselves on their front so they can pull themselves forward with their hands, while they push with their remaining leg. And all the time, the leg you shot off is twitching like mad, as if, if it had a few more nerve cells at its disposal, it would find a way to continue after you itself. There is shooting in the head — it's true, that works, destroy enough brain matter and they drop — but do you have any idea what it's like to try to hit a moving target, even a slow-moving one, in the head at any kind of distance? Especially if you aren't using a state-of-the-art sniper rifle, but the snub-nosed thirty-eight you bought ten years ago when the house next door was burglarized and haven't given a thought to since — and the face you're aiming at belongs to your pastor, who just last Saturday was exhorting the members of your diminished congregation not to lose hope, the Lord was testing you.

(From high over the Stage Manager's head, a spotlight snaps on, illuminating OWEN TREZZA standing in the center aisle about three-quarters of the way to the stage. He's facing the back of the theater. At a guess, he's in his mid-thirties, his brown hair standing out in odd directions the way it does when you've slept on it and not washed it for several days running, his glasses duct-taped on the right side, his cheeks and chin full of stubble going to beard. The denim jacket he's wearing is stained with dirt, grass, and what it would be nice to think of as oil, as are his jeans. The green sweatshirt under his jacket is, if not clean, at least not marred by any obvious discolorations; although whatever logo it boasted has flaked away to a few scattered flecks of white. In his outstretched right hand, he holds a revolver with an abbreviated barrel that wavers noticeably as he points it at something outside the spotlight's reach.)

Owen: Oh, Jesus. Oh, sweet Jesus. Stop. Stop right there! Pastor Parks? Please — don't come any closer. Pastor? It's Owen, Owen Trezza. Please — can you please stay where you are? I don't want to — you really need to stay there. We just have to make sure — Jesus. Please. Owen Trezza — I attend the ten o'clock service. With my wife, Kathy. We sit on the left side of the church — our left, a couple pews from the front. Pastor Parks? Can you please stop? I know you're probably in shock, but — please, if you don't stop, I'm going to have to shoot. It's Owen. My wife's expecting our first child. She has red hair. Will you stop? Will you just stop? Goddamnit,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pastor, I will shoot! I don't want to, but you're giving me no choice. Please! I don't want to have to pull this trigger, but if you don't stay where you are, I'll have to. Don't make me do this. For Christ's sake, won't you stop? I have a child on the way. I don't want to have to shoot you.

(From outside the range of the spotlight, the sound of inexpensive loafers dragging across the carpet.)

Owen: Pastor Parks — Michael — Michael Parks, this is your final warning. Stop right there. Stop. Right. There.

(The shoes continue their scrape over the carpet. From the rear of the theater, a terrible odor rolls forward, like the cloud that hangs around the carcass of a deer two days dead and burst open on a hot summer afternoon. Owen's hand is shaking badly. He grabs his right wrist with his left hand, which steadies it enough for him to pull the trigger. The gun cracks like an especially loud firecracker and jerks up and away. Owen brings it back to aim.)

Owen: Okay — that was a warning shot. Now please stay where you are.

(The rough noise of the steps is joined by the outline of a figure at the edge of the spotlight's glow. Owen shoots a second time; again, the gun cracks and leaps back. He swings it around and pulls the trigger four times, straining to keep the pistol pointed ahead. Now the air is heavy with the sharp smell of gunsmoke. Hands at its sides, back stiff, swaying like a metronome as it walks, the figure advances into the light. It is a man perhaps ten years Owen's senior, dressed in a pair of khaki slacks and a black short-sleeved shirt whose round white collar is crusted with dried blood. Except for a spot over his collar, which is open in a dull, ragged wound the color of old liver, his skin is gray. Although it is difficult to see his face well, it is slack, his mouth hanging open, his eyes vacant. The hammer clacks as Owen attempts to fire his empty gun.)

Owen: Come on, Pastor Parks. I'm sorry I called you Michael. Come on — I know you can hear me. Stop. Please. Stop. Will you stop? Will you just stop? For the love of Christ, will you just fucking STOP!

(PASTOR MICHAEL PARKS — or, the zombie formerly known by that name — does not respond to Owen's latest command any more than he has those preceding it. Owen's hands drop. A look passes over his face — the momentary stun of someone recognizing his imminent mortality — only to be chased off by a surge of denial. He starts to speak.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(Whatever he was about to say, whether plea or threat or defiance, is drowned out by a BOOM that staggers the ears. Simultaneously, the back of Pastor Parks's head blows out in a spray of stale blood and congealed brains and splinters of bone that spatters those sitting to either side of the aisle. The minister drops to the floor.

(The Stage Manager has risen to his feet. In his right hand, he holds out a long-barreled pistol trailing a wisp of smoke. For what is probably not more than five seconds, he keeps the gun trained on the Pastor's unmoving body, then raises the revolver and returns it to a shoulder holster under his left arm. Owen Trezza continues staring at the corpse as the spotlight snaps off. The Stage Manager resumes his seat.)

Stage Manager: No, there are some marksmen and -women about, that's for sure, but it's equally sure they're in the minority. Most folks have to rely on other methods. A few would-be he-men have tried to play Conan the Barbarian, rushed the zombies with a hatchet in one hand, a butcher knife in the other. One particularly inspired specimen, a heavyset guy named Gary Floss, rip-started the chainsaw he'd bought to take down the line of pines in front of his house. (This was a mistake: then everyone saw what lousy shape Gary kept his house in.) The problem is, that hatchet you have in your right hand isn't a weapon; it's a tool you've used splitting wood for the fireplace, and while it's probably sharp enough for another winter's worth of logs, it's not going to separate someone's head from their shoulders with a single blow from your mighty arm. The same thing's true for the knife sweating up your left hand: it's cutlery, and if you recall the effort it takes to slice a roast with it — a roast that is not trying to find its way inside your skull with its persistent fingers — you might want to reconsider your chances of removing limbs with ease. Even if you have a razor-sharp axe and an honest-to-God machete, these things are actually rather difficult to use well. The movies — again — aside, no one picks up this kind of weapon and is instantly skilled with it; you need training. In the meantime, you're likely to leave your hatchet lodged in a collar bone, the pride of your assorted knives protruding above a hip.

As for Gary Floss and his chainsaw — you want to be careful swinging one of those around. A man could take off an arm.

(To the right and left of the theater, the snarl of a chainsaw starting.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It revs once, twice, a third time, changes pitch as it catches on something. It blends with a man's voice shrieking — then silence.)

Stage Manager: What works is fire. Zombies move away from fire faster than they move toward a fresh kill. The problem is, they're not especially flammable — no more than you or I are — so you have to find a way to make the fire stick. For a time, this meant Billy Joe Royale's homemade napalm. A lingering sense of civic responsibility precludes me from disclosing the formula for Billy Joe's incendiary weapon, which he modified from suggestions in — was it *The Anarchist Cookbook*? or an old issue of *Soldier of Fortune*? or something he'd watched on the Discovery Channel, back before it stopped broadcasting? (It's the damnedest thing: do you know, the History Channel's still on the air? Just about every other channel's gone blue. Once in a while, one of the stations out of the City will manage a broadcast; the last was a week and a half ago, when the ABC affiliate showed a truncated news report that didn't tell anyone much they hadn't already heard or guessed, and a rerun of an episode of *General Hospital* from sometime in the late nineties. But wherever the History Channel is located, someone programmed in twenty-four hours' worth of old World War II documentaries that have been playing on continuous loop ever since. You go from D-Day to Pearl Harbor to Anzo, all of it in black and white, interrupted by colorful ads for restaurant chains that haven't served a meal in a month, cars that no one's seen on the road for as long, movies that never made it to the theater. Truth to tell, I think the folks who bother to waste their generator's power on the TV do so more for the commercials than any nostalgia for a supposed Greatest Generation. These days, a Big Mac seems an almost fabulous extravagance, a Cadillac opulent decadence, a new movie an impossible indulgence.)

That's all a bit off-topic, though. We were talking about Billy Joe and his bathtub napalm. By the time he perfected the mixture, the situation here had slid down the firepole from not-too-bad to disastrous, all within the matter of a couple of days. Where we are —

Son of a gun. I never told you the name of this place, did I? I apologize. It's — the zombies have become so much the center of existence that they're the default topic of conversation, what we have now instead of the weather. This is the town of Goodhope Crossing, specifically, the municipal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cemetery out behind the Dutch Reformed Church. Where I'm sitting is the oldest part of the place; the newer graves are....

(The Stage Manager points out at the audience.)

Stage Manager: Relax, relax. While there's nowhere that's completely safe anymore, the cemetery's no worse a danger than anyplace else. For the better part of — I reckon it must be going on four decades, local regulations have decreed that every body must be buried in a properly sealed coffin, and that coffin must be buried within a vault. To prevent contamination of groundwater and the like. The zombies have demonstrated their ability to claw their way out of all sorts of coffins time and again, but I have yet to hear of any of them escaping a vault. Rumors to the contrary, they're not any stronger than you or me; in fact, as a rule, they tend to be weaker. And the longer they go without feeding, the weaker they become. Muscle decay, you know. Hunger doesn't exactly kill them — it more slows them down to the point they're basically motionless. Dormant, you might say. So the chances are good that anyone who might've been squirming around down there in the dirt has long since run out of gas. Granted, not that I'm in any rush to make absolutely sure.

It is true, those who passed on before the requirement for a vault were able to make their way to the surface. A lot of them weren't exactly in the best of shape to begin with, though, and the ordeal of breaking out of their coffins and fighting up through six feet of earth — the soil in these parts is dense, thick with clay and studded with rocks — it didn't do anything to help their condition, that's for sure. Some of the very old ones didn't arrive in one piece, and there were some who either couldn't complete the trip or weren't coherent enough even to start it.

(Stage right, a stage light pops on, throwing a dim yellow glow over one of the tombstones and JENNIFER and JACKSON HOWLAND, her standing behind the headstone, him seated on the ground in front of and to its right. They are sister and brother, what their parents' friends secretly call Catholic or Irish twins: Jennifer is ten months her brother's senior, which currently translates to seventeen to his sixteen. They are siblings as much in their build — tall yet heavy — as they are in their angular faces, their brown eyes, their curly brown hair. Both are dressed in orange hunting caps and orange hunting vests over white cable-knit sweaters, jeans, and construction boots. Jennifer props a shotgun against her right

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hip and snaps a piece of bubblegum. Jackson has placed his shotgun on the ground behind him; chin on his fists, he stares at the ground.)

Jennifer: I still say you're sitting too close.

Jackson: It's fine, Jenn.

Jennifer: Yeah, well, see how fine it is when I have to shoot you in the head to keep you from making me your Happy Meal.

(Jackson sighs extravagantly, pushes himself backward, over and behind his gun.)

Jackson: There. Is that better?

Jennifer: As long as the person whose grave you're sitting on now doesn't decide your ass would make a tasty treat.

(Jackson glares at her and climbs to his feet.)

Jennifer: Aren't you forgetting something?

(She nods at the shotgun lying on the ground. Jackson thrusts his hands in the pockets of his vest.)

Jackson: I'm sure there'll be plenty of time for me to arm myself if anything shows up.

Jennifer: Don't be so sure. Christine Compton said her family was attacked by a pair of eaters who ran like track stars.

Jackson: Uh-huh.

Jennifer: Why would she make that up?

Jackson: She — did Mr. Compton kill them?

Jennifer: It was Mrs. Compton, actually. Christine's dad can't shoot worth shit.

Jackson: Regardless — they're both dead, these sprinting zombies. Again. So we don't have to worry about them.

Jennifer: There could be others. You never know.

Jackson: I'll take my chances. (Pauses.) Besides, it's not as if we need to be here in the first place.

Jennifer: Oh?

Jackson: Don't you think, if Great-Grandma Rose were going to return, she would have already? I mean, it's been like, what? ten days? two weeks? since the last ones dug themselves out. And it took them a while to do that.

Jennifer: Right, which means there could be others who'll need even longer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jackson: Do you really believe that?
Jennifer: Look — it's what Dad wants, okay?
Jackson: And we all know he's the poster-child for mental health these days.
Jennifer: What do you expect? After what happened to Mom and Lisa —
Jackson: What he says happened.
Jennifer: Not this shit again.
Jackson: All I'm saying is, the three of them were in the car — in a Hummer, for Christ's sake. They had guns. How does that situation turn against you? That's an honest question. I'd love to know how you go from that to —
Jennifer: Just shut up.
Jackson: Whatever.

(The siblings look away from one another. Jackson wanders the graves to the right, almost off-stage, then slowly turns and walks back to their great-grandmother's grave. While he does, Jennifer checks her gun, aims it at the ground in front of the tombstone, and returns it to its perch on her hip. Jackson steps over his shotgun and squats beside the grave.)

Jackson: Did Dad even know her?
Jennifer: His grandmother? I don't think so. Didn't she die before he was born? Like, years before, when Grandpa Jack was a kid?
Jackson: I guess. I don't remember. Dad and I never talked about that kind of stuff — family history.
Jennifer: I'm pretty sure he never met her.
Jackson: Great.

(Another pause.)

Jennifer: You want to know what I keep thinking about?
Jackson: Do I have a choice?
Jennifer: Hey, fuck you. If that's the way you're going to be, fuck you.
Jackson: I'm sorry. Sorry, geez.
Jennifer: Forget it.
Jackson: Seriously. Come on. I'm sorry.
Jennifer: I was going to say that, for like the last week, I haven't been able to get that Thanksgiving we went to Grandpa Jack's out of my head. That cranberry sauce Dad made —
Jackson: Oh yeah, yeah! Man, that was awful. What was it he put in it....

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jennifer: Jalapeño peppers.
Jackson: Yes! Yes! Remember, Grandpa started coughing so hard —
Jennifer: His teeth shot out onto Mom's plate!
Jackson: Yeah...(He wipes his eyes.) Hey. (He stands, stares down at the grave.) Is that — what is that?
Jennifer: What?
Jackson: (Pointing.) There. In the middle. See how the ground's...

(Jennifer positions her gun, setting the stock against her shoulder, lowering the barrel, and steps around the headstone.)

Jennifer: Show me.

(Jackson kneels, brings his right hand to within an inch of the ground.)

Jennifer: Not so close.
Jackson: You see it, right?

(Jennifer nods. Jackson rises and steps back onto his gun, almost tripping over it.)

Jennifer: You might want to cover your ears.

(Jennifer fires five times into the earth. Jackson slaps his hands to either side of his head as dirt jumps up from the grave. The noise of the shotgun is considerable, a roar that chases its echoes around the inside of the theater. There's a fair amount of gunsmoke, too, so that when Jennifer steps back and raises her gun, Jackson coughs and waves his arms to clear the air.)

Jackson: Holy shit.
Jennifer: No sense in doing a half-assed job.
Jackson: Was it her?
Jennifer: I think so. Something was right at the surface.
Jackson: Let's hope it wasn't a woodchuck.
Jennifer: Do you see any woodchuck guts?
Jackson: I don't see much of anything. (He stoops, retrieves his shotgun.) Does this mean we can go home?
Jennifer: We should probably wait a couple more minutes, just to be sure.
Jackson: Wonderful.

(The two of them stare down at the grave. The stage light pops off.)

Stage Manager: Siblings.

Right — what else can I tell you about the town? I don't imagine latitude and longitude are much use; I'm guessing it'll be more helpful for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me to say that New York City's about an hour and a half south of here, Hartford an hour and a half east, and the Hudson River twenty minutes west. In an average year, it's hot in the summer, cold in the winter. There's enough snow to give the kids their fair share of snow days; you can have thunderstorms so fierce they spin off tornadoes like tops. At one time, this was IBM country; that, and people who commuted to blue collar jobs in the City at places like Con Ed. That changed twice, the first time in the early nineties, when IBM collapsed and sent a host of middle-aged men and women scrambling for work. The second time was after 9/11, when all the affluent folks who'd suddenly decided Manhattan was no longer their preferred address realized that, for the same amount of money you were spending on your glorified walk-in closet, you could be the owner of a substantial home on a reasonable piece of property in a place that was still close enough to the City for you to have a manageable commute.

Coming after the long slowdown in new home construction that had followed IBM's constriction, this sent real estate prices up like a Fourth of July rocket. Gentrification, I guess you'd call it. What it meant was that your house significantly appreciated in value in what seemed like no more than a month — it wasn't overnight, no, not that fast, but fast enough, I reckon. We're talking thirty, forty, fifty percent climbs, sometimes higher, depending on how close you were to a Metro-North station, or the Taconic Parkway. It also meant a boom in the construction of new homes — luxury models, mostly. They didn't quite achieve the status of McMansions, but they were too big on the outside with too few rooms on the inside and crowded too close to their neighbors, with a front yard that was just about big enough to be worth the effort it was going to cost you to yank the lawnmower to life every other Saturday. If you owned any significant amount of property, the temptation to cash in on all the contractors making up for lost time was nigh-irresistible. That farm that hadn't ever been what you'd call a profit-machine, and that had been siphoning off more money than it gave back for more years than you were comfortable admitting, became a dozen, fifteen parcels of land, a new little community with a name, something like Orchard Hills, that you could tell yourself was an acknowledgment of its former occupant.

What this expansion of houses meant was that, when the zombies started showing up in significant numbers, they found family after family

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

waiting for them in what must have seemed like enormous lunchboxes.

(From the balcony, another spotlight snaps on, its tightly focused beam picking out MARY PHILLIPS standing in front of the orchestra pit. Although she faces the audience, her gaze is unfocused. She cannot be thirty. Her red hair has been cut recently — poorly, practically hacked off in places, where it traces the contours of her skull, and only partially touched in others, where it sprouts in tufts and a couple of long strands that suggest its previous style. The light freckles on her face are disturbed by the remnants of what must have been an enormous black eye, which has faded to a motley of green and yellow, and a couple of darker spots, radiating out from her right eye. She is wearing a white dress shirt whose brownish polka dots appear to have been applied irregularly, even haphazardly, a pair of almost-new dark jeans, and white sneakers clumped with mud. She keeps her hands at her sides in tight fists.)

Mary: I was in the kitchen, boiling water for pasta. We'd had a gas delivery a couple of weeks before — it's funny: everything's falling to pieces — this was after the first outbreak had been contained, and all the politicians and pundits were saying yes, we'd had a close call, but the worst was past — what had happened in India, Asia, what was happening in South America — none of that was going to happen here. No matter that there were reports the things — what we were calling the eaters, because zombies sounded too ridiculous — the eaters had been sighted in a dozen different places from Maine to California, none of them previously affected. You heard stories — my next-door neighbor, Barbara Odenkirk — she was the HR director for an ad agency in Manhattan, and she commuted to the City every day, took the train from Beacon. The last time we talked, she told me that there were more of them, the eaters, along the sides of the tracks every trip. She said none of the guys on the train acted particularly concerned — if an eater came too close to a moving train, it didn't end well for them. I asked her about the places alongside the tracks, what about them, the towns and cities and houses — I'd taken that same ride I don't know how many times, when Ted and I first started seeing one another, and I remembered all the houses you saw sitting off in the woods. Oh, Barbara said, she was sure the local police were on top of the situation. They weren't, of course, not like Barbara thought. I don't know why. When that soccer game in Cold Spring was attacked — we were so

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

surprised, so shocked, so outraged. We should have been packing our cars, cramming everything we could fit into our Volvos and BMWs and heading out of town, tires screaming. Where, I'm not sure. Maybe north, up to the Adirondacks — I heard the situation isn't as bad there. Even the Catskills might have been better.

But the gas truck pulled into the driveway the way it did every six months, and the power was on more than it was out, and we could drive to Shop Rite — where, if the shelves were stocked thinner than we'd ever seen them, and the butcher case was empty, not to mention the deli and fish counters, we could fill our baskets with enough of the foods we were used to for us to tell ourselves that the President was right, we were through the roughest part of this, and almost believe it. Ted had bought a portable generator when the first outbreak was at its height, and it looked as if Orlando would be overrun; everyone else was buying whatever guns they could lay their hands on, and here's my husband asking me to help him unload this heavy box from the back of the car. He was uptight — I think he was expecting me to rake him over the coals for not having returned from Wal-Mart with an armful of rifles. I wasn't angry; if anything, I was impressed with his foresight. I wasn't especially concerned about being armed — at that point, I still believed the police and National Guard were capable of dealing with the eaters, and if they weren't, I was surrounded by neighbors who were two steps away from forming their own militia. The blackouts, though — we were lucky: the big one only lasted here until later that same night. According to NPR, there were places where the lights were out for a week, ten days. But there were shorter outages every few days, most no more than five or ten seconds, a few a solid couple of hours. Having the generator —not to mention the big red containers of gas I had no idea how Ted had obtained: rationing was already in effect, and most gas stations were pretty serious about it — that generator gave me a feeling of security no machine gun could have matched. To tell the truth, I was more worried by Ted's insistence that he could hook it up himself. Being in IT does not give you the magical ability to master any and all electrical devices — how many times had I said that to him? Especially when Sean Reynolds two houses over is an electrician who loves helping out with this kind of stuff. But no, he's fully capable of doing this, which is what he'd said about the home

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

entertainment system he tripped half the circuit breakers in the house setting up. What was I supposed to do? I made sure to unplug the computers, though, as well as the entertainment center.

Somehow — with a lot more cursing than I was happy with the kids hearing from their father — he succeeded, which is why, on that particular afternoon, I was standing at the kitchen stove waiting for a pot of water to boil. Robbie had asked for mac and cheese again, and I wasn't inclined to argue with her, since Brian would eat it, too, and we had more than enough boxes of it stacked in the pantry. It was the organic kind that only needed a little bit of milk added to make the sauce, which I thought was more economical; although the stuff had cost more to begin with, so where's the sense in that? The power had gone out an hour earlier, and while we tried to use the generator prudently, starting it up now didn't seem especially extravagant. I waited until I was ready to start dinner, then ran out onto the back porch, down the stairs, and under the porch to where Ted had installed the generator. When Ted was home, the moment he heard that lock click, he dropped whatever he was doing to dash into the kitchen and ask if I'd made sure it was safe to go outside. No matter what I replied, he'd insist on checking, himself — as if he could see better through his glasses than I could with 20/20 vision. I got that it was a guy thing, and in its own way, I suppose it was kind of sweet. Really, though — unless there was an eater standing outside the door, I didn't think I had anything to worry about. They weren't much for running — most of them had trouble walking. Okay, high school track was ten years and two kids in my past, but I was still in good enough shape from chasing after those kids to leave Ted eating my dust. Granted, my husband's idea of exercise was putting away the dishes; the point is, I wasn't concerned about being caught by an eater. From what I'd heard on the radio, they were most dangerous in large numbers, when they could trap you. Sure, there were woods at the edge of the backyard that could've hidden a decent-sized group of them, but I was fairly confident my well-armed neighbors would mow the lot of them down the second they staggered into the open. We were pretty anal about checking the tree line; I tried to do it at least once an hour, usually on the hour when the hall clock played its electronic version of the Westminster Chimes, but some of the neighbors were at their windows every fifteen or twenty minutes. Matt Odenkirk had a pair

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of high-powered binoculars — they looked like they cost a bundle — and he would stand on his back porch staring into the woods for minutes at a time. It was as if he was certain the eaters were out there, doing their best to blend in with the foliage, and all he needed was to catch one of them moving to reach for the equally expensive-looking rifle balanced against the railing and be the hero of the neighborhood. Which never happened. I don't think he fired that gun once — I don't think it was in his hands when — when they — when he —

The generator started no problem; I was out and in the house almost before the kids realized. I turned on the stove light and filled a pot with water from the cooler — which always drove Ted crazy. "That's for drinking only," he'd say. "Use the water from the filter jugs for cooking." But our water tasted funny; I'm sorry, it did, and no matter how many times you passed it through those jugs, it was like drinking from a sulfur spring. "What do you mean?" Ted would — he'd insist. "It tastes fine." Okay, I'd say, then you can drink it, which he would, of course, to prove his point. When he wasn't home, though — on a day like today, when he'd driven in to IBM because they were open — I can't imagine what they could have been doing, what business they could have been conducting, with everything the way it was — on a day like today, we used the bottled water for cooking.

I lit the burner, set the pot on it, and switched on the transistor radio. Usually, I kept the radio quiet, because who knew what the news was going to be today? Granted, NPR wasn't as bad as any of the TV channels, which, as things had deteriorated in Florida and Alabama, had taken to broadcasting their raw footage, so that when Mobile was overrun, you saw all the carnage in color and up close and personal. But NPR had sent a reporter to Mobile, and when the National Guard lines collapsed, she was caught on the wrong side — trapped inside a car. The eaters got her, and you heard pretty much everything. First, she's saying "Oh no, oh please," as they pound on the car windows. Then the windows shatter, she screams, and you can hear the eaters, the slap of their hands on the upholstery as they grab at her and miss, the rip of the reporter's clothes where they catch her, and their voices — I know there's a lot of debate about the sounds they make, whether they're expressions of coherent thought or just some kind of muscle spasm, but I swear, I listened to that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

broadcast all the way through, and those were voices, they were saying something. I couldn't make out what, because now the reporter was shrieking, emptying her lungs in panic and pain. I thought that was as bad as it would get — as it could get — but I was wrong. There was a sound — it was the sound a drumstick makes when you twist it off the Thanksgiving turkey, a long tearing followed by a pop — only, it was...wet. The reporter's voice went from high to low, from scream to moan, and that moan — it was awful, it was what comes out of you the moment you set one foot into death and feel it tugging the rest of you after. The rest — one of the eaters figured out how to open one of the car doors. Whatever the reporter was wearing rasped on the seat as she was dragged out, her moan rising a little as she realized this was it, and then there was a noise like the rest of that Thanksgiving bird being torn apart in all directions, this succession of ripping and snapping, and then you hear the eaters feeding, stuffing pieces of the reporter into their mouths, grunting with pleasure at the taste. It —

Robbie was old enough to understand what was on the radio, and even Brian picked up on more than you expected. I didn't want to expose them to something like that. As it was, they heard too much from the other kids in the neighborhood, especially the McDonald girls. Alice, their mother, was one of those parents who likes to pretend they're treating their kids with what they call respect, when really, all they're doing is exposing them to all kinds of things they're too young to handle. A parent — a mother isn't supposed to — that's not your job. Your job — your duty, your sacred duty — it is your sacred duty to protect those children, to keep them safe no matter what — you have to protect them, no matter —

Well, I was. With the generator running, I could let them watch a DVD, which had gone from a daily occurrence — sometimes twice-daily — to a treat like going to the movies had been when I was their age. They were so thrilled Robbie was willing to sit down to *The Incredibles*, which Brian adored but didn't do anything for her. So with the two of them safely seated in front of the TV, I was safe to turn on the radio, low, and try to catch up with what news I could as the water came to a boil.

And you know, the news wasn't bad. I wouldn't call it good, exactly, but the National Guard seemed to be making progress. They'd held onto Orlando; although apparently Disney World was the worse for it; and had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

caught a significant number of the eaters on one of the major highways — I can't remember the number; it may have been Highway 1 — where they'd brought in the air power, let the planes drop bombs on the eaters until they were in so many microscopic pieces. Given what we learned about them in the weeks after, this was about the worst thing that could have happened, since it spread bits of them and their infection to the four winds, but at the time, it sounded like a step forward. There was talk of retaking Mobile; a team of Navy SEALs had rescued a group of survivors holed up in City Hall, and a squad of Special Forces had made an exploratory journey into the city that had brought them to within sight of the harbor. Of course, the powers-that-be are going to tell you that things are better than they are, but I was willing to believe them.

I heard the truck pull up outside, heard the slow rumble of its engine, the squeal and hiss of its air brakes. I noticed it, but I wasn't especially concerned. The Rosses had sold their house across the street to a couple from the City who supposedly had paid them almost a million dollars for it. The news made our eyes goggle; Ted and I spent a giddy couple of hours imagining how we might spend our million. Once we went online to check housing prices in the Adirondacks, though, all our fantasies came crashing down. Up north, a million was the least you'd pay for a place not even half the size of ours. We knew Canada had closed the border, but we looked anyway. With the state of the U.S. dollar, it was more like 1.5 million for the same undersized house. It appeared we would be staying where we were. And we'd have new neighbors, whose moving truck had arrived.

Sometimes, I think about that driver. I don't know anything about him — or her, it could have been a woman; although, for some reason, I always picture a man. Not a kid: someone in his fifties, maybe, kind of heavyset, with a crewcut that doesn't hide the gray in his hair. He's been around long enough to have seen all kinds of crises, which is why he doesn't panic, keeps working through this one. No one else at the delivery company wants to make the drive upstate with him, risk the wilds to the north, but he's happy to leave the City for a day. Everybody's on edge. There are soldiers and heavily armed police clustered at all the docks, the airports, the train stations, the bus terminals. Everyone who arrives in the City is supposed to be examined by a doctor flanked by a pair of men who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

keep the laser-sights of their pistols centered on the traveler's forehead for the duration of the exam. The slightest cause for concern — fever, swollen and tender glands, discolored tongue — is grounds for immediate quarantine. Protest, and those men to either side of the doctor are expressly authorized to put a pair of bullets in your head. What's worse is, with the police largely off the streets, groups of ordinary citizens have taken it on themselves to patrol the City for eaters. They've given themselves license to stop and question anyone they consider suspicious, and if you ask what gives them the right, they'll be only too happy to show you the business ends of their assorted pistols and rifles. There's been at least one major shootout between two of these patrols, each of whom claimed they thought the other were eaters. Cops had to be pulled off port duty to bring it under control, which they did by shooting most of the participants.

I can't imagine anything happened to the driver while he was in the City. My guess is, he passed through the checkpoints and was on his way without a hitch. It was a nice, early-fall morning, the air cool but not cold, the leaves on the verge of losing their green, the sun bright but not oppressive. Maybe he had the radio on, was listening to one of the AM stations out of the City. He heard the news out of Florida and thought, *I knew it*. He decided to take the next exit, stop at a Dunkin Donuts for a celebratory coffee and a Boston Cream.

As he steered into the parking lot, maybe he noticed the absence of any other cars. Or maybe he saw the lights on in the donut shop and assumed he'd arrived during a lull in business. He parked the truck, climbed down from the cab, and walked toward the glass door. There are times I see him striding up to the counter, his eyes on the racks of donuts on the wall opposite him, not aware of anything unusual until he sees that all the racks are empty. In what feels to him like slow motion, he turns to the tables to his right and takes in the floor slick with blood, the remains of the last patrons scattered across the tables. Then I think, *That's ridiculous — there's no way he would not have seen all of that right away.* The second he swung open the door, he would have smelled it. Chances are, he wouldn't have had to go that far — he would have seen the blood splashed across the windows and immediately turned around. Either way — whether he bolts out of the place or walks away without going in — he would be distracted, shocked by what he's (almost) seen. Maybe the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

closest he's been to something like this has been an image on the TV. It's the reason he doesn't pick up on the feet dragging across the tarmac until the eater is out from around the front of the truck and practically on him. The driver's eyes bulge; if he's never been this close to such carnage, you can be sure he's never had an eater lurching toward him, either. His feet catch on one another and he trips, which causes the eater to trip and fall on top of him. For one horrifying moment, he's under the thing, under that stink, the teeth clacking in his ear as it tries to take a bite out of him, those hands pawing at him. He drives his right elbow back and up into its face. Fireworks of pain burst in his arm but the eater rolls off him. He scrambles to his feet, kicking at the eater's hands as they try to drag him down again, and climbs up and into the truck's cab. Maybe he jumps when the eater slaps the door, almost drops the keys his fingers can't fit into the ignition. The eater pounds the door, throws itself against it, actually makes the truck rock ever so slightly. The key slides into place, the engine turns over, and the driver grinds the gears putting the truck into first. He speeds out of that parking lot so fast the rear end of the truck bashes a telephone pole, throwing open one of the rear doors and tumbling a couple of plastic crates out onto the road. His foot doesn't leave the gas pedal. Let them take it out of his pay. His heart is hammering, his hands trembling on the wheel. If he smokes, he's desperate for a cigarette; if he quit, he wishes he hadn't; if he never has, he wishes he'd started.

It wouldn't have been until that Dunkin Donuts was a good thirty, forty minutes in his rearview mirror that the driver would have felt his right elbow throbbing. When he glanced down, he saw blood on the seat and floor. He turned his arm over. His stomach squeezed at the torn skin bright with blood, the pair of broken teeth protruding just above the joint. His foot relaxed on the gas; the truck slowed to the point it was barely moving. His vision constricted to a tunnel; he wondered if he was about to faint. He took the wheel with his right hand, reached around with his left, and felt for the jagged edges of the eater's teeth. The blood made them slippery, hard to keep hold of. He dug his fingers into his skin, seeking purchase, but that only squeezed out more blood. There was no choice; he had to stop. He clicked on the hazards, steered to the shoulder, and set the brake. He did not turn off the engine. He leaned over and slid the First Aid box out from under his seat. His fingers slipped on the catch. Once he had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it open, he found the bottle of sterile saline and the stack of gauze bandages. He sprayed half the bottle over his elbow, unwrapped a couple of bandages, and wiped his skin. There was a pair of tweezers in the box; despite his shaking hand, he succeeded in tugging one, and then the other, tooth from his arm. Their extraction caused more bleeding. He dropped the tweezers on the floor, next to the teeth, and emptied the remainder of the saline on his elbow. There were enough gauze pads left for him to wipe his elbow off and improvise a bandage using the roll of surgical tape.

No one really understood what brought the eaters out of the ground, up off their tables in the morgues and funeral homes, in the first place. There was all kinds of speculation, some of it ridiculous — Hell was full: Ted and I had a good laugh over that one — some of it more plausible but still theoretical — NPR had on a scientist from the CDC who talked about a kind of super-bacteria, like a nasty staph infection that could colonize a human host in order to gain more flesh to consume; although that seemed like a lot for a single microorganism to accomplish. Besides, none of the eaters the government had captured showed the slightest response to any of the antibiotics they were injected with. I wondered if it was a combination of causes, several bacteria working together, but Ted swore that was impossible. Because the IT thing made him an expert in bacteriology, too.

What we did know was that, if an eater got its teeth in you, even if you escaped becoming its next meal, you were finished all the same. It just took longer — between thirty minutes and forty-eight hours. The initial symptoms were a raging fever, swollen and tender glands, and a tongue the color of old meat; in short order, these were followed by hallucinations, convulsions, and death. Anywhere from five minutes to two hours after your heart had ceased beating, your body — reanimated was the technical term. It was incurable, and if you presented to your doctor or a hospital ER with the telltale signs, you were taken as fast as possible to a hospital room, hooked up to monitors for your heart rate and blood pressure, and strapped onto a bed. If there was an experimental cure making the rounds that day, it would be tested on you. When it didn't work, you would be offered the services of the clergy, and left for the inevitable. An armed guard was stationed outside your door; after the monitors had confirmed your death, he would enter the room, unholster his pistol, and make sure

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you didn't return. At first, the guards were given silencers, but people complained, said they felt better hearing the gunshot, knowing they were safe.

I don't know how much of this the driver knew, but I'm guessing he'd heard most of it, which is why he didn't take himself to the nearest hospital as soon as he realized what had happened to him. Instead, he switched off the hazards, released the brake, and headed back out onto the road. It could be he was thinking he had to make this last delivery while he could, but I doubt it. He was already dead; his body simply needed to catch up to that fact. His mind, though — his mind was not having any of this. As far as his mind was concerned, he'd scraped his arm, that was all, hardly enough to have turned him into one of those things, and if he went on with this day the way he'd intended, everything would be fine. If he had to roll down his window, because the cab had grown so hot he checked to be sure he hadn't turned the heater on high, he must be fighting off the cold that was making the rounds at work. That same cold must be what was causing the skin under his jaw to feel so sore. The temptation to tilt the rearview mirror so he could inspect his tongue must have been almost too much to resist.

If the driver heard anything moving in the back of the truck, he probably assumed it was more of the plastic crates come loose, maybe a piece of furniture that had broken the straps securing it. Of course, by then his fever would have ignited, so the eaters could have banged around the inside of that container for the hours it took him to complete what should have been a sixty-minute trip and I doubt he would have noticed. Or, the sounds might have registered, but — you know how it is when you're that sick: you're aware of what's going on around you, but there's a disconnect — it fails to mean what it should. How else do you explain what led this guy to drive a large moving truck full of eaters into the middle of a neighborhood — into the middle of our neighborhood — my neighborhood, the place where I lived with my husband and my kids, my girl and my boy — how else do you explain someone fucking up so completely, so enormously?

That's right — the truck that came to a stop outside the house (as I watched bubbles forming at the bottom of the pot of water I was heating) was full — it was packed with eaters. Don't ask me how many. And no,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I don't know how they got in there. I'd never heard of anything like that before. Maybe the things were chasing someone who climbed into the back of the truck thinking the eaters wouldn't be able to follow them and was wrong. Maybe the eaters started as a group of infected who were in the same state of denial as the driver and wanted to hide themselves until they recovered — which, of course, they didn't. Maybe they didn't jump into the truck all at the same time: maybe a few were in pursuit of a meal, a few more were looking to hide, and a few others thought they'd found a cool place to escape the sun. As the fever soared within him, his neck ached so bad swallowing became agony, his tongue swelled in his mouth, the driver must have let the truck slow to a stop over and over again, leaning his head on the steering wheel for whatever comfort its lukewarm plastic could provide. There would have been plenty of opportunities for eaters to hitch a ride with him.

I don't know what that man's fate was, whether he died the moment he set the parking brake, or opened the door and stepped down from the cab to let his customers know their furniture had arrived, or if the eaters figured out the door handle and dragged him from his seat. But I hope they got to him first; I hope he found himself in the middle of a group of eaters and had consciousness left to understand what was about to happen to him. I hope — I pray; I get down on my knees and plead with God Almighty that those things ripped him apart while his heart was still beating. I hope they stripped the flesh from his arms and legs. I hope they jammed their fingers into him and rooted around for his organs. I hope they bit through his ears the way you do a tough piece of steak. I hope he suffered. I hope he felt pain like no one ever felt before. That's why I spend so much time imagining him, so that his death can be as real — as vivid — to me as possible. I —

The first bubbles had lifted themselves off the bottom of the pot and drifted up through the water to burst at the surface. On the radio, the report about the Special Forces in Mobile had ended, and the anchor was talking about sightings of eaters in places like Bangor, Carbondale, and Santa Cruz, which the local authorities were writing off as hysteria but at least some of which, the anchor said, there was disturbing evidence were true; in which case, they represented a new phase in what he called the Reanimation Crisis. From the living room, Brian yelped and said, "Scary!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which he did when something on the screen was too much for him; Robbie said, "It's okay — Vi's gonna get them out. Watch," one of those grace notes your kids sound that makes you catch your breath, it's so unexpected, so pure. There was a knock at the front door.

It sounded like a knock. When I rewind it and play it again in my mind, it still sounds like a knock, no matter how I try to hear it otherwise. None of the descriptions of the eaters mentioned anything about knocking. Besides, I hadn't heard anyone's gun going off, which I fully expected would announce the arrival of eaters in our neck of the woods. Of course, this was because everyone was watching the treeline behind the houses; I realize how ridiculous it sounds, how unforgivably stupid, but it never occurred to any of us that the eaters might walk right up to our front doors and knock on them. Or — I don't know — maybe we were aware of the possibility, but assumed there was no way a single eater, let alone a truckload of them, could appear in the middle of the street without someone noticing.

I left the pot with the wisps of steam starting to curl off the water and walked down the front stairs to the door. At the top of the stairs, I thought it might be Ted home from work, but on the way down I decided it couldn't be him, because he wouldn't have bothered knocking, would he? It had to be a neighbor, probably the McDonald girls come to ask if Robbie wanted to go out and play with them. They were forever doing things like that, showing up five minutes before dinner and asking Robbie to play with them — which, the second she heard their voices, Robbie naturally was desperate to do. I tried to compromise, told Robbie she could go out for a little while after she was done with her food, or invited the McDonald girls to join us for dinner, but Robbie would insist she wasn't hungry, or the McDonald girls would say they had already eaten, or were going to have pizza later, when their father brought it home. At which, Robbie would ask why we couldn't have pizza, which Brian would hear and start chanting, "Piz-za! Piz-za! Piz-za!" Sometimes I let Robbie run out and kept a plate warm for her, let her eat with Ted and me when he got home, which she loved, being at the table with Mommy and Daddy and no little brother. Sometimes, though, I told the McDonald girls to return in half an hour, Roberta was sitting down to her dinner — and prepared myself for the inevitable storm of protests. I hadn't made up my mind what my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

decision this time would be, but my stomach was clenching. I turned the lock, twisted the doorknob, and pulled the door open.

They say that time slows down in moments of crisis; for some people, maybe it does. For me, swinging that door in was like hitting the fast-forward button on the DVD player, when the images on the screen advance so fast they appear as separate pictures. One moment, I'm standing with the door in my hand and a trio of eaters on the front step. They're women, about my age. I think — the one nearest me is missing most of her face. Except for her right eye, which is cloudy and blue and looks as if it's a glass eye that's been scuffed, I'm staring at bare bone adorned with tatters and shreds of muscle and skin. Her mouth — her teeth part, and I have the absurd impression she's about to speak to me.

The next moment, I'm scrambling up the stairs backward. I could leap them three at a time — I have in the past — but there's no way I'm turning my back on the figures who have entered the house. The pair behind the faceless one don't appear nearly as desiccated: their skin is blue-gray, and their faces show no expression, but compared to what's raising her right foot to climb the stairs after me, they're practically normal.

The moment after that, I'm in the kitchen, one hand reaching for the handle of the pot of water, which hasn't come to full boil yet. Behind me, I can hear the stairs shifting under the eaters' weight. I can smell them — God, everything I've heard about the way the things smell is true. I want to call to the kids, tell them to get in here with me, but it's all I can do not to vomit.

That second, the second my fingers are closing around the handle — that's the one I return to. When I replay the three minutes it took my life to disintegrate, I focus on me in the kitchen. I can't remember how I got there. I mean, I know how I went from the stairs to the kitchen, I don't know why. Once I reached the top of the stairs, it would have been easy enough to haul myself to my feet and run into the living room, to Robbie and Brian. We could have — I could have shoved the couch out from the wall, used it to delay the eaters while we ran for the back door — or even around them, back down the stairs and out the front door, or into the downstairs rec room. We could have barricaded ourselves in the garage. We — instead, I ran for the kitchen. I realize I must have been thinking about a weapon; I must have been searching for something to defend

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

myself — us with, and the pot on the stove must have been the first thing that occurred to me. This has to be what made me choose the kitchen, but I can't remember it. All I have is me on the stairs, and then my fingers curling around that piece of metal.

Which isn't in my hand anymore; it's lying on the kitchen floor, and Miss Skull-Face's right eye has sagged downward because the pot has collapsed her cheek where it struck it. The hot water doesn't appear to have had any affect on her; although a couple of the pieces of flesh dangling from her face have fallen onto her blouse. She's moving toward me fast, her hands outstretched, and I see that she's missing two of the fingers on her left hand, the ring and pinkie, and I wonder if she lost them trying to prevent whoever it was from tearing off her face.

The next thing, I'm on the floor, on my back, which is numb. My head is swimming. Across the kitchen tiles from me, Miss Skull-Face struggles to raise herself from her back. At the time, I don't know what's happened, but I realize now the eater's rush carried us into the wall, stunning us both. The other eaters are nowhere to be seen.

And then I'm on the other side of the kitchen island, which I've scooted around on my butt. I'm driving the heel of my left foot straight into the eater's face, the shock of the impact traveling through the sole of my sneaker up my leg. I feel as much as hear the crunch of bone splintering. I'm as scared as I've ever been, but the sensation of the eater's face breaking under my foot sends a rush of animal satisfaction through me. Although I'm intent on the web of cracks spreading out from the sudden depression where Miss Skull-Face's nose and cheeks used to be, I'm aware that her companions are not in the kitchen.

I must — if I haven't before, I must understand that the other eaters have left Miss Skull-Face to deal with me and turned in search of easier — of the — I know I pull myself off the floor, and I'm pretty sure I kick the same spot on the eater's face with the toe of my sneaker, because afterward, it's smeared with what I think are her brains. What I remember next is —

(To the front, rear, left, and right of the theater, the air is full of screaming. At first, the sound is so loud, so piercing, that it's difficult for anyone in the audience to do anything more than cover her or his ears. Mary raises her hands to either side of her head; it does not appear that the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stage Manager does, even as the screams climb the register from terror to pain. Muffled by skin and bone, the screams resolve themselves into a pair of voices. It is hard to believe that such noises could issue from the throats of anything human; they seem more like the shrieks of an animal being vivisected. As they continue for four, five, six seconds — an amount of time that, under other circumstances, would pass almost without notice but that, with the air vibrating like a plucked guitar string, stretches into hours — it becomes possible to distinguish the screams as a single word tortured to the edge of intelligibility, made the vessel for unbearable pain: "Mommy."

(The screaming stops — cut off. Mary removes her hands from her ears hesitantly, as if afraid her children's screams might start again.)

Mary: That's — there are — they — there are some — I don't — there are some things a mother shouldn't have to see, all right? My parents — I — when I was growing up, our next door neighbor's oldest son died of leukemia, and my mother said, "No parent should outlive their children." Which is true. I used to think it was the worst thing that could happen to you as a parent, especially of small children. But I was wrong — I was — they — oh, they had them in their teeth —

(Now Mary screams; head thrown back, eyes closed, hands clutching her shirt, she opens her mouth and pours forth a wail of utter loss. When her scream subsides to a low moan, her head drops forward. She brings her hands to her head, runs one over it while the other winds one of the long strands of her hair around itself.

(From the front of the theater, Mary's voice speaks, but from the echo-y quality of the words, it's clear this is a recording.)

Mary's Voice: That second, the second my fingers are closing around the handle — that's the one I return to. When I replay the three minutes it took my life to disintegrate, I focus on me in the kitchen. I can't remember how I got there. I mean, I know how I went from the stairs to the kitchen, I don't know why. Once I reached the top of the stairs, it would have been easy enough to haul myself to my feet and run into the living room, to Robbie and Brian. We could have — Robbie and Brian. I didn't want to expose them to something like that. A parent — a mother isn't supposed to — that's not your job. Your job — your duty, your sacred duty, is to protect those children, to keep them safe no matter what — we — instead, I ran

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for the kitchen. I realize I mist have been thinking about a weapon; I must have been searching for something to defend myself — us with, and the pot on the stove must have been the first thing that occurred to me. This has to be what made me choose the kitchen, but I can't remember it. You have to protect them, no matter —

(The recording stops. The spotlight snaps off, and Mary is gone, lost to the darkness.

(Slowly, the Stage Manager comes to his feet. Once he is up, he looks away from the audience, toward the willow behind him. He takes a deep breath before turning toward the audience again.)

Stage Manager: Here's the problem. When you sign up for this job — when you're cast in the part, if you like — you're told your duties will be simple and few. Keep an eye on things. Not that there's much you can do — not that there's anything you can do, really — but there isn't much that needs doing, truth to tell. Most of the business of day-to-day existence takes care of itself, runs ahead on the same tracks it's used for as long as there've been people. Good things occur — too few, I suppose most would say — and bad things, as well — which those same folks would count too numerous, I know — but even the very worst things happen now as I'm afraid they always have. Oh, sure, could be you can give a little nudge here or there, try to make sure this person won't be at work on a June morning that'll be full of gunfire, or steer the cop in the direction of that house she's had a nagging suspicion about, but mostly, you're there to watch it all take place.

Then something like this — then this, these zombies, folk getting up who should be lying down — it overtakes you, sweeps across the world and your part of it like — like I don't know what, something I don't have words for. You do the best you can — what you can, which mostly consists of putting on a brave face and not turning your eyes away from whatever horror's in front of you; although there may be opportunities for more direct action.

(Through his jacket, the Stage Manager pats his gun.)

Stage Manager: You try to maintain some semblance of a sense of humor, which is not always as hard as maybe it should be. There's something to the old saw about horror and humor being flip sides of the same coin. An idiot takes his arm off with his chainsaw trying to play hero — I grant you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it's pretty grim fodder for laughs, but you make do with what's to hand — so to speak.

A situation like this, though, like this poor woman and her children — those children — I know what she saw when she ran into that living room. I know what that is on her shirt, and how it got there. I can't — I don't have the faintest idea what I'm supposed to do with that knowledge. I could tell you, I suppose, but to what end? You know what those things — those eaters, that's not a bad word, is it? — you know what they did to that little girl and that little boy. There's no need for the specifics. Maybe you'd rather hear about the scene that greeted Mary when she fled her house in horror, or maybe you've guessed that, too: her neighbors' houses overrun, pretty much without a single shot being fired.

This is the beginning of the second phase of the zombie trouble — what did that newscaster call it? The Reanimation Crisis? From something people were watching on their TVs, or seeing outside the windows of their trains, zombies become something that's waiting for you when you go to get in your car, that clatters around your garage, that thumps on your door. Situation like this, where folks have known the world's going to hell and been preparing themselves for it — which mostly means emptying their bank accounts accumulating as many guns as Wal-Mart'll sell them — you'd expect that all that planning would count for something, that those zombies never would have made it up Mary's front walk, that one or the other of her neighbors would have noticed what was tumbling out the back of that delivery truck and started shooting. There'd be a lot of noise, a lot of mess, possibly a close call or two, but everything would turn out well in the end. Mary would be home with her kids, her neighbors would be patting themselves on the backs with a certain amount of justifiable pride, and at least one zombie outbreak would have been contained. Instead, Mary's the only one to escape alive, which she accomplishes by running screaming out of her house, up the street and out onto Route 376, where she's struck by a red pickup truck driven by an eighteen-year-old girl who received it as a birthday present from her parents last month.

Mary avoids being hit head-on, which would've killed her, but she's tossed to the side of the road. To her credit, the girl stops, reverses, and leaves the truck to see to the woman who collided with it. Actually it's a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

risky move — for all the girl knows, she could've knocked down a zombie. Mary's pretty seriously concussed, but it's clear to the girl she hails from one of the big houses on the side street — the houses from which a few zombies are emerging, doused with blood. The girl doesn't waste any time: she hustles Mary into her truck and literally burns rubber racing away. The girl — who deserves a name: she's Beth Driscoll — Beth takes Mary into the center of Goodhope Crossing, to the new walk-in emergency-care place, and stays with her as the doctor examines her with an openly worried expression on his face. Mary's in what he's going to call a fugue state — like being part of the way into a coma — and she's never going to surface from it. The doctor — Dr. Bartram, for the record — tries to arrange for an ambulance to transfer her to one of the local hospitals, but all at once, the ambulances are very busy. By the time he considers driving her himself, the police will have told everyone to stay off the roads. When those same police start stumbling through the front doors with wounds of their own for the doc to treat, Mary will be placed on a cot in one of the hallways and left there. Beth will check on her as she's able, which won't be much, because she'll be busy helping the doc and his staff with the injured. After the medical facilities are transferred to St. Pat's church hall, Mary's installed there, given a futon-bed and a molded plastic chair and a garbage bag full of assorted sweatpants, T-shirts, underwear, and socks. Beth tends to her as she can.

Ted doesn't show up looking for his wife. In fairness to him, that's due to his having parked in front of his house about two minutes after Beth sped off with Mary. Once he realized what was taking place, he bolted his car for the house, whose front door he'd noticed open and which had him dreading the worst. The worst met him at the door, in the form of the pair who'd devoured his children, one of whom was holding Brian's stuffed frog, which was dark with blood. You may consider it a kindness that Ted died without seeing what was left of his beloved daughter and son upstairs.

Mary can eat and drink, use the toilet if you take her to it. Speak to her, and she'll bob her head in your direction. There are times, after Beth's sat with her for an hour, maybe read to her from the Bible (which Beth secretly hopes might produce a miraculous cure), the girl looks at Mary half-slumped in her chair, or reclining on her bed, and wonders if Mary isn't lucky to be like this, safe from the chaos that's descended on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

world. She has no idea — she can have no idea that deep within Mary's psyche, she's standing at that stove for the ten-thousandth time, watching a pot full of water begin to boil, waiting for her children to start screaming.

(The Stage Manager sighs, looks up, looks down, rubs his hands together halfheartedly, sighs again.)

Stage Manager: I never finished telling you about the town, did I? Not that it makes much difference at this point, but maybe one or two of you are curious.

(Once more, the Stage Manager settles himself on the ground, against the headstone; although he appears to have more trouble finding a comfortable position than previously.)

Stage Manager: All right. What more is there to say about Goodhope Crossing? The longer-term history of the town isn't that much different from any other in this neck of the woods. There were farms around these parts as far back as the Dutch, but Goodhope Crossing, as the name suggests, owes itself to the railroads. In the years after the Civil War, when track was stitching up the country everywhere you looked, three north-south lines and one east-west line met one another right here.

(From the orchestra pit, a quartet of wooden train whistles sound softly.)

Stage Manager: There was a long, low hill to the east of the junction, a stream and some flatter land to the west. The town was plotted on that axis, the poorer folk crowding their small houses together on the hill, the better off setting up Main Street and its larger dwellings on the other side of the stream. From those two locations, the town spread outward, most of the commercial establishments opening on the other side of the hill; while the majority of new homes went up on and just off Main Street. Lot of Irish settled here; Poles and Italians, too. Big Catholic population: the local church, St. Patrick's, started on Main Street and by the turn of the century had moved across the stream to the top of another hill just south of the one most of its parish lived on. St. Pat's was part of the Archdiocese of New York; right before everything fell apart, they were the third or fourth largest congregation in the fold.

Interestingly — you might even say, ironically — enough, pretty much the entire surviving population has relocated to the hill, which remained a location of more...affordable housing. Control the high ground:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it's what a military strategist will tell you, and it's a good plan, for zombies as much as anything. Once the half-dozen or so who'd staggered up Concord Street were dealt with, and all the dwellings had been checked and double-checked to be sure they were clear, folks started putting up the best barrier they could as fast as they could around the foot of the hill, tipping over cars; running barbed wire; propping up old boxsprings, mattresses; piling whatever looked as if it might hold a walking corpse at bay long enough for you to have a clear shot at it: sofas, bureaus, bookcases, china cabinets.

(From either side of the theater, the sounds of men and women grunting, furniture creaking atop other furniture.)

Stage Manager: Hillary Schwabel, who used to manage the local True Value hardware, strung some wires all the way around what people already had christened the Wall and hooked them to several of her louder alarms; she also hung a dozen motion-detector lights from trees and houses next to the Wall. Things are so sensitive a cat'll trip them, but it beats the alternative. As a rule, zombies travel in numbers; when you see one of them, you see ten, twenty, sometimes as many as fifty, a hundred. A significant percentage of that group is going to be limber enough to make a try at getting past the Wall — and all it takes is for one of them to succeed, grab someone and start biting, for you to want to know they're moving in your direction while they're still a safe distance away. It's another myth that they only, or mostly, move at night. Their eyesight's poor to nonexistent — apparently, the ravages death inflicts on the eyes are exacerbated by the process of reanimation. Although they never stop moving completely, if you should have the misfortune to come across them after dark, they're likely to be shuffling their feet, practically standing in place. No, they prefer the light; the dawn pouring through the trees sets them going. A bright day is practically a guarantee you're going to see some of them.

All of that said, a few of them have been known to travel by night, especially if the moon is full. And even inching forward a little bit at a time will bring you somewhere, eventually. Better safe than sorry, right?

Have you noticed how disasters bring out the clichés in droves? Why is that? Is the trite and overused that consoling? Or is it that, even though the brain is short-circuiting, it still wants to grasp what's going on, so it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reaches for whatever tools are at hand, no matter how worn and rusted? Or is the language breaking down along with everything else? I've never been what you'd call a poet, but I have always prided myself on my phrasing, on a knack for finding a fit and even memorable form for whatever sentiment I'm attempting to convey. Lately, though — lately, I swear I sound more and more like a parody of a Good Ole Boy, your folksy uncle with his bucket of country wisdom.

Nor is that the worst. Before everything went down the crapper, one of my — you might say duties; although I considered it more a responsibility, if that distinction means anything to you — anyway, one of the things I did was to help those who'd shuffled off their mortal coils come to grips with their new condition. Mostly, this meant talking with them, taking them for a last look at their loved ones, about what you'd expect. In a few cases, I let them have one of their days over again, which, knowing what they knew now, tended to be a more unhappy experience than they'd anticipated. Even after I'd spoken to them, showed them what I could, there were a few who refused to walk down the long dark hall to join the ranks of those who'd gone before, who insisted on remaining in their house, or at the spot they'd ceased breathing, which was a shame, but was allowed for.

Once the dead started to rise, though — for the one thing, death no longer separated what lasted from what didn't; instead, the two remained bound together as the one began its new existence. For another thing, the destruction of that second life — or un-life — didn't allow matters to proceed on their natural course. Instead...well, maybe you want to see for yourselves.

(The theater's lights come on. Their harsh brightness reveals the center aisle, side aisles, front, and rear of the theater crowded with figures — with zombies, it appears, since the men, women, and children surrounding the audience bear the familiar signs of decay. Whatever shock and fear the appearance of so many of them in such proximity engenders, however, is gradually tempered by their complete lack of movement. Indeed, with the exception of one figure shuffling its way from the very back of the theater up the center aisle, the apparent zombies might as well be mannequins.)

Stage Manager: Being chained to that body as it stumbles along in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

single-minded pursuit of flesh, as it finds and kills and consumes that flesh — it isn't good for the other part, for what I call the spark — it twists it, warps it, so that when it's cut loose, this is how it appears. Mostly. A few — I haven't worked out the exact numbers, but it's something on the order of one in a thousand, fifteen hundred — they show up hostile, violent, as if what they last were in life has followed them across its borders. There's no talking to them, let alone reasoning with them. I'm not certain what they could do to me — there've been rumors through the grapevine, but you know how that it is — but I'm not inclined to find out.

(The Stage Manager rises to his feet, withdrawing his revolver from its shoulder holster on the way. In a continuous motion, he extends his arm, sights along the long barrel of the gun, and squeezes the trigger. The gun's BOOM stuns the air; the young man in the brown three-piece suit who is approximately halfway to the stage jerks as the back of his head detonates in a surprisingly solid clump. The young man falls against one of the motionless forms in the aisle, an old woman wearing a blue dress and a knitted white pullover, who barely moves as he slides down her to the floor. The Stage Manager maintains his aim at the young man for five seconds, then levels the gun and sweeps it across the theater. It is difficult to ascertain whether his eye is on the figures in the aisle, the audience in their seats, or both. Unable to locate any further threats, he reholsters the pistol. He remains standing.)

Stage Manager: That's — there's nothing else I can do. It means — I don't like thinking about what it means. It's a step up from what a fellow like that was, but — it's not a part of the job I relish. Could be, it would be a service to the rest of these folks, but I haven't got the stomach for it.

(The Stage Manager lowers himself to the ground. The lights dim but not all the way. The forms in the aisles remain where they are.)

Stage Manager: Once in a while — it's less and less, but it still happens — a regular person finds their way here. That was how I had the chance to talk with Billy Joe Royale, he-of-the-famous-homemade-napalm. I'd witnessed his handiwork in action — must have been the day after the day after that truckload of zombies parked in the middle of Mary Phillips's neighborhood. The number of zombies had increased exponentially; the cops had been overrun in most places; the National Guard who were supposed to be on their way remained an unfulfilled promise. Those who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could had retreated to the parking lot of St. Pat's, which, since the hill hadn't yet been fortified, looked to be the most defensible position. I reckon it was, at that. There wasn't time for much in the way of barriers or booby traps, but those men and women — there were forty-six of them — did what they could.

(From the right and left of the theater comes a cacophony of gunfire; of voices shouting defiance, instructions, obscenity, encouragement; of screams. It is underscored by a frenzied, atonal sawing of the violins. It subsides as the Stage Manager continues to speak, but remains faintly audible.)

Stage Manager: In the end, though, no matter how much ammunition you have, if the zombies have sufficient numbers, there's little you can hope for aside from escaping to fight another day. These folks couldn't expect that much: they'd backed themselves against the church's north wall, and the zombies were crowding the remaining three sides.

Exactly how Billy Joe succeeded in evading the zombies, finding his way inside St. Pat's, climbing up the bell-tower, and shimmying out onto the roof — all the while carrying a large cloth laundry-bag of three-liter soda bottles full of an extremely volatile mixture — I'd like to take credit for it, but I was down below, all my attention focused on the by-now forty-two defenders staging what I was sure was their updated Alamo. They were aiming to die bravely, and I was not about to look away from that. When the first of Billy Joe's soda-bottle-bombs landed, no one, myself included, knew what had just taken place. About twenty feet back into the zombies' ranks, there was a flash and a clap and an eruption of heavy black smoke. Something had exploded, but none of the men and women could say what or why. When the second, third, fourth, and fifth bombs struck in an arc to either side of the first, and smoke was churning up into the air, and the smell of dead skin and muscle barbecuing was suddenly in everyone's nostrils, it was clear the cavalry had arrived. A couple of guys looked around, expecting a Humvee with a grenade launcher on top, or an attack helicopter whose approach had been masked by the noise of the fighting. The rest were busy taking advantage of the wall of fire the bombs had created, which separated the zombies on this side of it from those on the other, reducing their numbers from who-could-count-how-many to a more manageable thirty or forty. While they worked on clearing the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

zombies closest to them, Billy Joe continued to lob bottle after bottle of his fiery concoction, dropping some of them into the thick of the zombies, holding onto others almost too long, so that they detonated over the zombies, literally raining fire down on their heads. He'd stuffed twenty-three bottles into that laundry bag, and he threw all but one of them.

(The din of the battle rises again, accompanied by the pops of a drumstick tapping on a drum, and the lower thrum of viols being plucked. The pops increase, the thrums increase, then the violins scream an interruption and all noise stops.)

Stage Manager: That last bomb was what killed him, a single-serve Coke bottle that remained in his hand past the point of safety. It blew off his right arm to the elbow and hurled him flaming from the roof. He didn't survive the fall, which was just as well, since his burning corpse was shot by roughly half the people he'd saved. Stupid, but understandable, I guess.

He took longer to show up than I'd anticipated, the better part of a day, during which his identity and his actions had been discovered, along with the two hundred additional bottles of napalm standing row after row in his parents' basement. Unfortunately, he hadn't seen fit to leave the formula, but those bombs were a big downpayment on buying those among the living sufficient time to move to the hill and begin the process of securing it. There've been a couple of tries at duplicating his secret mix, neither of which ended well.

(From the rear of the theater, the faint *crump* of explosions.)

Stage Manager: As for Billy Joe....

(Stage left, a stage light pops on, throwing a dim yellow glow over one of the tombstones and BILLY JOE ROYALE, who is a very young sixteen, his face struggling with its acne, a few longish hairs trying to play a goatee on his chin. He is dressed in an oversized blue New York Giants shirt, baggy jeans, and white sneakers. A backward baseball cap lifts the blond hair from his forehead, which emphasizes the surprise smoothing his features. He hooks his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans in what must be an effort at appearing calm, cool. He sees the Stage Manager and nods at him. The bill of the Stage Manager's hat tilts in reply.)

Billy Joe: So are you, like, him?

Stage Manager: Who is that?

Billy Joe: You know — God.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stage Manager: I'm afraid not.
Billy Joe: Oh. *Oh*. You aren't —
Stage Manager: I'm more of a minor functionary.
Billy Joe: What, is that some kinda angel or something?
Stage Manager: No. I'm — I meet people when they show up here, help them find their bearings. Then I send them on their way.
Billy Joe: Like a tour guide, one of those hospitality guys.
Stage Manager: Close enough.
Billy Joe: Where am I headed?

(The Stage Manager points stage right.)

Stage Manager: You see that hall over there?
Billy Joe: That looks pretty dark. I thought it was supposed to be all bright and shit.
Stage Manager: No, that's just an effect produced by the cells in your eyes dying.
Billy Joe: Oh. Where does it go?
Stage Manager: Where everyone else has gone.

(Billy Joe notices the figures in the aisles. He nods at them.)

Billy Joe: What about them? Are they —
Stage Manager: Yes.
Billy Joe: Shouldn't they be moving down that hall, too?
Stage Manager: They should.
Billy Joe: So why aren't they?
Stage Manager: I'm not sure. It's got something to do with what's going on — where you came from.
Billy Joe: These guys were like, the living dead?
Stage Manager: That's right.
Billy Joe: Wild. Any of them try to eat you?
Stage Manager: A couple.
Billy Joe: What'd you do?
Stage Manager: I shot them in the head.
Billy Joe: Huh. That work, here?
Stage Manager: It seemed to do the trick.
Billy Joe: It's just, I thought, you know, being where we are and all —
Stage Manager: Some things aren't all that much different. You'd be surprised.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Billy Joe: I guess so. Do you know, like, what caused all this shit — I mean, what brought all those guys back from the dead? Because Rob — he's this friend of mine — he was — anyway, Rob was like, It's all a big government conspiracy, and I was like, That's ridiculous: if it's a government conspiracy, why did it start in like, fucking India? And Rob —
Stage Manager: I don't know. I don't know what started it; I don't know what it is.
Billy Joe: Really?
Stage Manager: Really.
Billy Joe: Shit.
Stage Manager: Sorry.
Billy Joe: Does anyone?
Stage Manager: What do you mean?
Billy Joe: Does anyone know what's going on?
Stage Manager: Not that I've heard.
Billy Joe: Oh.
Stage Manager: Look — maybe there's someplace you'd like to see, someplace you'd like to go....
Billy Joe: Nah, I'm good.
Stage Manager: Are you sure there's nowhere? Your house, school —
Billy Joe: No, no — I mean, thanks and all, but — it's cool.
Stage Manager: All right; if you're sure.
Billy Joe: So...that's it?
Stage Manager: What else would you like?
Billy Joe: I don't know. Isn't there supposed to be some kinda book, you know, like a record of all the shit I've done?
Stage Manager: That's Santa Claus. Sorry — no, there's nothing like that. All the record you have of what you've done is what you can say about it.
Billy Joe: Huh. So what's it like?
Stage Manager: What's what like?
Billy Joe: Wherever that hall leads.
Stage Manager: Quiet.
Billy Joe: Oh.

(Billy Joe crosses the stage slowly, passing behind the Stage Manager, until he stands as far stage right as he can without leaving the stage.)

Billy Joe: That's it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stage Manager: It is.

Billy Joe: Well, no point in delaying the inevitable, right?

Stage Manager: I suppose not.

Billy Joe: Can you tell me one thing — before I go, can you answer one question?

Stage Manager: I can try.

Billy Joe: We're fucked, aren't we?

(The Stage Manager pauses, as if weighing his words.)

Stage Manager: There's always a chance — I realize how that sounds, but there's just enough truth left in it to make it worth saying. Things could turn around. Someone could discover a cure. Whatever's driving the zombies could die out — hell, it isn't even winter yet. A couple weeks of freezing temperatures could thin their numbers significantly. Or someone could be resistant to their bite, to the infection. With six-plus billion people on the planet, you figure there has to be one person it doesn't affect....

Billy Joe: Do you believe any of that shit?

Stage Manager: No.

Billy Joe: Yeah.

(He exits, stage right.)

Stage Manager: Understand, it's not that I don't want to believe any of it. I want to believe all of it. All of that shit, as my young friend would say. But doing so has traveled past the point of hard to the point of no return. No, this — this, I fear is how the day runs down for the human race. It's how *Homo sapiens sapiens* departs the scene, carried off a bite at a time in the teeth of the undead. If there weren't so much pain, so much suffering in the process, you could almost see the humor in it. This is the way the world ends, not with a bang, and not with a whimper, but with the bleak gusto of a low-budget horror movie.

(The Stage Manager reaches for his flashlight, which he shuts off and takes with him as he rises from his seat and walks to the back of the stage. He is visible against the bulk of the willow, and then the shadows have him. The theater lights come up, revealing the aisles still full of the dead. Men, women, old, young, most wearing their causes of their several demises, they encompass the audience, and do not move.)

For Fiona, and with thanks to John Joseph Adams.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INDEX TO VOLUMES 114 & 115, JANUARY-DECEMBER 2008

Aikin, Jim:
Run! Run! ..... Sep 153
Anderson, Darrel: *Cover:*
"Hypermail" ..... Jan
Bacigalupi, Paolo:
Pump Six (nvlt) ..... Sep 9
Bash, Kent: *Covers for*
"Balancing Accounts" ..... Feb
"The Political Prisoner" ..... Aug
Bertolini, Max: *Cover for*
"New Beginning" ..... OcN
Bisson, Terry:
Private Eye ..... OcN 158
Blumlein, Michael:
The Roberts (nvla) ..... Jul 45
Bowes, Richard:
If Angels Fight (nvlt) ..... Feb 131
Bradfield, Scott: *Dazzle Joins the*
Screenwriter's Guild ..... OcN 108
Cambias, James L.:
Balancing Accounts ..... Feb 6
The Dinosaur Train ..... Jul 142
Chappell, Fred:
Curiosities ..... OcN 242
Cheney, Tom:
Cartoons ..... Jul
Competition # 75 ..... Apr 159
Competition # 76 ..... OcN 239
Cowdrey, Albert E.:
The Overseer (nvla) ..... Mar 43
Thrilling Wonder Stories ..... May 101
Poison Victory (nvlt) ..... Jul 121
Inside Story ..... OcN 6
A Skeptical Spirit (nvlt) ..... Dec 94
Cunningham, P. E.:
Monkey See... ..... Jun 102
Dalrymple, Scott:
Enfant Terrible ..... Jul 105
An Open Letter to Earth ..... Aug 114
de Lint, Charles:
Books to Look For ..... Jan–Dec
Di Fate, Vincent: *Cover for*
"The Overseer" ..... Mar
Di Filippo, Paul:
Plumage from Pegasus ..... Jan,Mar,May,Jul,OcN
Curiosities ..... Jun 162
Doherty, Paul: see Murphy, Pat
Doyle, Debra & Macdonald, James D.:
Philologos; or, A Murder in
Bistrita ..... Feb 113
Eggleton, Bob: *Cover:*
"The Moment" ..... Dec
Emshwiller, Carol:
Whoever ..... OcN 174
Ench, Cory and Catska: *Cover for*
"Arkfall" ..... Sep
Evans, Mark: *Cover for*
"Immortal Snake" ..... May
Farris, Joseph:
Cartoons ..... Sep
Finlay, Charles Coleman:
The Political Prisoner (nvla) . Aug 44
Gilbow, S.L.:
Rebecca's Locket ..... May 35
Gilman, Carolyn Ives:
Arkfall (nvla) ..... Sep 62
Goldstein, Lisa:
Reader's Guide ..... Jul 36
Goulart, Ron:
Memoirs of the Witch Queen .. Feb 63
Gunn, Eileen: See Swanwick, Michael
Hand, Elizabeth:
Books ..... Feb,May,Sep
Hardy, David: *Cover for*
"Litany" ..... Jun
Harris, S.:
Cartoons ..... Jan,Mar
Haw, Kevin N.:
Render Unto Caesar ..... Apr 96
Hughes, Matthew:
Petri Parousia ..... Feb 83
Fulbrim's Finding (nvlt) ..... Jul 6
Irvine, Alex:
Mystery Hill (nvlt) ..... Jan 116
Jablokov, Alexander:
The Boarder (nvlt) ..... Mar 4
Jartos, George:
Cartoon ..... Apr
Jeffers, Alex:
Firooz and His Brother ..... May 90
Kasischke, Laura: *Search Continues*
for Elderly Man ..... Sep 57
Kessel, John:
Pride and Prometheus (nvlt)...Jan 55
King, Stephen: The New York Times
at Special Bargain Rates ..... OcN 99
Kosmatka, Ted:
The Art of Alchemy (nvlt)..... Jun 4
Laidlaw, Marc:
Childrun (nvlt) ..... Aug 7
Langan, John: *How the Day*
Runs Down (nvlt) ..... Dec 121
Langford, David:
Curiosities ..... May,Aug ... 162
Law, Warner: *The Alarming*
Letters From Scottsdale ..... Dec 79
Lee, Rand B.:
Litany (nvlt) ..... Jun 124
Bounty ..... Aug 133
Picnic on Pentecost ..... Sep 118
Long, Bill:
Cartoons ..... Mar,Apr, May,Jun,Jul,Aug
Macdonald, James D.: See Doyle, Debra
MacIntyre, F. Gwynplaine:
Curiosities ..... Jan,Apr,Jul 162

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Maio, Kathi:
Films ..... Jan,Mar,May,Jul
Manzieri, Maurizio: *Cover for "Five Thrillers"* ..... Apr
Masear, Arthur:
Cartoons ..... Jan-Jun,Sep-Dec
McMullen, Sean:
The Twilight Year (nvlt) ..... Jan 4
Michaud, Al: *The Salting and Canning of Benevolence D.* (nvlt) ..... Jun 50
Miller, Ann:
Retrospect (nvlt) ..... Feb 40
Mirabelli, Eugene:
Falling Angel ..... Dec 48
Mondolithic Studios: Cover for *"The Roberts"* ..... Jul
Moriarty, Chris:
Books ..... Aug
Mueller, Richard:
A Ten-Pound Sack of Rice .... Mar 148
But Wait! There's More! (nvlt) .. Aug ... 137
Murphy, Pat, and Paul Doherty:
Science ..... Mar,OcN
Nestvold, Ruth:
Mars: A Traveler's Guide ..... Jan 97
Pollack, Rachel:
Immortal Snake (nvlt) ..... May 43
Popkes, Steven:
Bread and Circus ..... Feb 93
Another Perfect Day ..... Aug 123
Powell, James:
The Quest for Creeping Charlie .. Jan .. 104
Reed, Robert:
Five Thrillers (nvlt) ..... Apr 48
Reunion ..... May 6
Character Flu ..... Jun 98
Salad for Two ..... Sep 137
The Visionaries (nvlt) ..... OcN 126
Leave (nvlt) ..... Dec 56
Rickert, M.:
Traitor ..... May 128
Evidence of Love in a Case of Abandonment: One Daughter's Personal Account ..... OcN 192
Rini, J.P.:
Cartoons ..... Jan,Jun,OcN
Roessner, Michaela:
It's a Wonderful Life ..... Jan 40
Russo, Richard Paul:
The Second Descent ..... Mar 126
Ryman, Geoff:
Days of Wonder (nvlt) ..... OcN 54
Sallis, James:
Books ..... Jan,Apr,Jul,Dec
Shanahan, Danny:
Cartoons ..... May
Shepard, Lucius:
Films ..... Feb,Apr,Jun,Aug,OcN,Dec
Springer, Nancy:
Rumple What? ..... Mar 23
Stoddard, James:
The First Editions (nvlt) ..... Apr 4
Sullivan, Tim: *The Nocturnal Adventure of Dr. O and Mr. D* (nvlt) ..... Apr 100
Planetesimal Dawn (nvlt) ..... OcN 201
Sussex, Lucy:
Curiosities ..... Dec 162
Swanwick, Michael:
The Scarecrow's Boy ..... OcN 231
Swanwick, Michael & Gunn, Eileen: *"Shed That Guilt! Double Your Productivity Overnight!"* ..... Sep 129
Thornburg, Mary Patterson:
Fergus ..... Jun 38
Tremayne, Peter:
Curiosities ..... Feb 162
Truesdale, Dave:
Curiosities ..... Sep 162
Tucker, George:
Circle (nvlt) ..... May 141
Utley, Steven: *The 400-Million-Year Itch* (nvlt) ..... Apr 135
Sleepless Years ..... OcN 41
Van Gelder, Gordon:
Editorials ..... Aug,Sep,Dec
Webster, Bud:
Curiosities ..... Mar 162
Wentworth, K. D.:
Exit Strategy ..... Mar 100
West, Michelle:
Musing on Books ..... Mar,Jun,OcN
White, Sophie M.:
December 22, 2012 (poem).... OcN 173
Wightman, Wayne:
A Foreign Country (nvlt) ..... Dec 7
Wilhelm, Kate:
The Fountain of Neptune ..... Apr 126
Winter, Laurel:
~~*Going Back* in *Time*~~ ..... OcN 155

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy&ScienceFiction
MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, pulps, books, fanzines. 96 page catalog. $5.00. Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853

20-time Hugo nominee. The New York Review of Science Fiction. *www.nyrsf.com* Reviews and essays. $4.00 or $40 for 12 issues, checks only. Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

Spiffy, jammy, deluxy, bouncy — subscribe to Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet. $20/4 issues. Small Beer Press, 176 Prospect Ave., Northampton, MA 01060.

NEW MASSIVE 500-page LEIGH BRACKETT COLLECTION Lorelei of the Red Mist: Planetary Romances $40 (free shipping) to: HAFFNER PRESS, 5005 Crooks Road Suite 35, Royal Oak, MI 48073-1239, *www.haffnerpress.com*

Invaders from the Dark by Greye la Spina and *Dr. Odin* by Douglas Newton, unusual fiction from Ramble House — *www.ramblehouse.com*

Weaving a Way Home: A Personal Journey Exploring Place and Story from Univ. of Michigan Press. "No one with a working heart will fail to be moved." –Patrick Curry

A Lovecraft Retrospective: Artists Inspired by H. P. Lovecraft, a large and lavish art book published by Centipede Press. Intro. by Harlan Ellison, afterwd. by Thomas Ligotti. 1000s of words of artist bios and history. 400 oversize pages, full color, 12 x 16, over 15 lbs! From Centipede Press, 2565 Teller Ct., Lakewood, CO 80214, jerad@centipedepress.com. SPECIAL: $100 off, $295 pstpd w/ slipcase.

Do you have *Fourth Planet from the Sun* yet? Signed hardcover copies are still available. Only $17.95 ppd from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

SLAUGHTERHOUSE 5, CATTLE 0. The first 58 F&SF contests are collected in *Oi, Robot*, edited by Edward L. Ferman and illustrated with cartoons. $11.95 postpaid from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

BACK ISSUES OF F&SF: Including some collector's items, such as the Fiftieth Anniversary Issue. Limited quantities of many issues going back to 1990 are available. Send for free list: F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

MISCELLANEOUS

If stress can change the brain, all experience can change the brain. *http://www.undoingstress.com*

Support the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship Fund. Visit *www.carlbrandon.org* for more information on how to contribute.

Witches, trolls, demons, ogres...sometimes only evil can destroy evil! *Greetmyre*, a deliciously wicked gothic fantasy..."A haunting read" (Midwest Book Review). Trade Paperback at *Amazon.com* or call *troll* free 1-877-Buy Book.

The Jamie Bishop Scholarship in Graphic Arts was established to honor the memory of this artist. Help support it. Send donations to: Advancement Services, LaGrange College, 601 Broad Street, LaGrange, GA 30240

Space Studies Masters degree. Accredited University program. Campus and distance classes. For details visit *www.space.edu*.

Driver, standby, needed for minor polit. campgn. Pay lo — adventure hi. Hi tolerance for public necess., but memories for a lifetime or two. R. Faber.

Thanks Tony *http://www.starshipsofa.com/* for introducing me to F&SF also SF Eley *http://escapepod.org/* Touting print Mags. From Kory *http://www.kdboardandcare.com/*

F&SF classifieds work because the cost is low: only $2.00 per word (minimum of 10 words). 10% discount for 6 consecutive insertions, 15% for 12. You'll reach 100,000 high-income, highly educated readers each of whom spends hundreds of dollars a year on books, magazines, games, collectibles, audio and video tapes. Send copy and remittance to: F&SF Market Place, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CURIOSITIES

ANNO DOMINI 2000; OR, WOMAN'S DESTINY BY JULIUS VOGEL (1889)

NOW THAT the prospect of an American woman President in 2009 is impossible, it is worth considering that 120 years ago a utopian novel has that feat occur in 2000. Instead of Bush vs. Gore, a woman of thirty-five, Mrs. Washington-Lawrence, with a teenage daughter but no spouse, occupies the White House.

This interesting scenario appears in a novel by Sir Julius Vogel (1835-99). He was born in London, of Dutch Jewish origins, and emigrated to the Australian goldfields in 1852. There he became a lively journalist, then newspaper editor. When the gold and opportunity waned, he emigrated to New Zealand and entered politics. His highest office was Premier of the then British colony. In retirement in London, he wrote *Anno Domini*, and thus the sf awards in NZ are the Vogels.

In these days of simplistic, left vs. right politics, it is worth noting that Vogel supported both feminism and Imperialism, opposing Communism while advocating social welfare: "Aspiration is most numbed in those whose existence is walled round with constant privation." His utopian 2000 is a British empire run from Australia, with the heroine Hilda Fitzherbert, a female parliamentarian (NZ women achieved the vote in 1893). She marries the Emperor and women achieve full rights. And America willingly rejoins the Empire.

The novel ultimately reads as a didactic romance, and as if Anthony Trollope's political Palliser novels had been dropped into a paintpot of utopias, and came out impossibly rosy. Yet its predictions, of wind and wave power, social justice and women's rights, still shine a beacon of hope.

—Lucy Sussex

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ORSON SCOTT CARD

returns to his bestselling series
in this direct sequel to *Ender's Game*

ENDER IN EXILE

At the end of *Ender's Game*, Andrew Wiggin—or Ender—was given the choice between living in isolation on Eros at one of the Hegemony's training facilities, or returning to his home planet. No longer just a boy who had merely won a game, Ender chose to go home. The story of his journey and the years that followed remained untold...until now.

"This is Card at the height of his very considerable powers—a major SF novel by any reasonable standard."

—*Booklist* on *Ender's Game*

Get the latest from Tor by signing up for our free monthly newsletter! www.tor-forge.com/newsletter

TOR

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IMAGINE A LIQUID INTELLIGENCE,
SPONTANEOUSLY SELF-ASSEMBLED FROM
TRASH IN THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER.

WATERMIND

MORE ALIEN THAN ANYTHING FROM SPACE—
IT SPRINGS FROM OUR OWN LITTER.

A NEW NOVEL FROM

M. M. BUCKNER

"A first-class novel."
—BEN BOVA

"Crisp and smart,
rich in ideas."
—GREGORY BENFORD

"Part techno-thriller, part
speculative science, and
all quality." —MIKE RESNICK

"Best book I've read in years."
—WILLIAM C. DIETZ

Get the latest from Tor by signing up for our free
monthly newsletter! www.tor-forge.com/newsletter

978-0-7653-2024-7 • 0-7653-2024-X
Now in Hardcover

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED